Fabulating Beauty
Cross Cultures

Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English

78

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To Gloria
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Preface: Framing Peter Carey

PAUL KANE

IN BRINGING TOGETHER THESE ESSAYS AND WRITINGS on the work of Peter Carey, Andreas Gaile has performed a service for which we may be grateful. This service includes the practical one of making readily available an intellectual resource for the study of Carey’s work, as well as the more general service of marking a moment in the reception of Peter Carey: a collection of critical essays is a tacit acknowledgment that the academy is in fact serious about a writer. (The public’s reception, of course, is another dimension.) To say this collection is overdue is redundant, since the condition of possibility for such a book is the recognition that it should already exist. As Gaile himself points out, for all the widespread attention given to Carey, this present book of essays is the first of its kind. Again, for this service we ought to be thankful.

But linked to the notion of service is the concomitant one of ‘performance’. Gaile performs a service in the sense of fulfilling or carrying out what is required and expected as an established procedure. He has acted in his role as editor and has seen to it that everyone else plays his or her part accordingly. Clearly, a collection of essays is a sub-genre and, while we may not yet know the particulars of the essays contained in one, we recognize the overall structure right away and treat it as we would any familiar type of literature. That, after all, is how literature works as a system. The rules of genre allow for comprehension. With the advent of Fabulating Beauty, Peter Carey’s writings are now fully implicated in this literary system – and critics, as we can see, are well along in the process of establishing what the work means and how it functions within that system. Gaile and the many fine critics and writers
gathered here have done a truly exemplary job: it is commendable and literally constitutes a model worthy of imitation.

In calling this book exemplary, however, we might wish to attend also to the auxiliary meaning of the word, ‘to serve as a warning’ (as when a judge awards exemplary damages). What sort of warning might this be? To begin with, we know that all systems are defined in part by what they leave out or exclude. This is not merely a matter of insufficient coverage (you can’t cover or include everything); rather, it takes us back to the structural idea of genre and the recognition that genres are themselves frames that differentiate or delimit one kind of writing from other kinds. Embedded in the exemplary is the admonition to notice the frame itself and attend to the implications: what we see is influenced – if not determined – by how something is framed; and our perception is mediated and partial (both incomplete and necessarily subjective). Once we are alerted to how a question is being framed, we are able to consider alternative contexts, and, just as looking at something with two eyes instead of one adds breadth and depth, so we often seek to frame things differently in order to see more clearly and accurately. The essays in this collection perform that function nicely, as each approach is itself a kind of frame. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these multiple frames is likely to generate for the reader an entirely new point of view, one even more capacious, discerning and judicious. For that, too, we ought to be grateful. But having invoked this monitory figure of the frame, one feels compelled to look again and consider another perspective, if only for the sake of an exemplum.

As is clear by now, Peter Carey is a writer whose work matters. When he himself becomes subject matter (in authorial not biographical terms), we know we are in another register of importance. To get at his work, critics most often deploy one or more of several frames: the nationalist, the postmodernist, or the postcolonial. (That the essays in this volume do not always fall into these familiar categories is evidence of the increasing sophistication of contemporary critical analysis; I am over-simplifying here to make a point.) At the same time, what seems inescapable about any approach to Carey’s work is the fact that he is Australian. His novels seem saturated with a self-conscious Australianness, however one might define it (in historical, political, or sociological terms, or even using an aesthetic or essentialist vocabulary). Peter Carey comes to us always already as an Australian novelist – a condition he himself quite happily urges, in his writings and in his many interviews. But what would it mean to frame Peter Carey otherwise? Is it even thinkable?

This admittedly contrarian approach can’t mean ignoring the overwhelming fact of the presence of Australia in Carey’s work, for that would make it truly unthinkable. But there are, I believe, precedents here that may be instructive. After all, we are well aware that Joyce was Irish, Borges Argen-
tinian, Kafka Czech, Woolf English. We know that Faulkner lived in Oxford, Mississippi, Proust in Paris, and Mann everywhere. We might argue about the relative importance of these places for each of them, but there is no denying that place matters. And yet we do not read these authors entirely within the frame of nationality or place. Their names themselves operate as signifiers of authority – that potent admixture of auctor, author and authenticity that yields the rubric major writer. There are many other such writers, most of whom we would identify by their surnames alone, but they all have one thing in common: in the end, they vigorously break out of any frame we might design for them. I am not suggesting that the Australian writer Peter Carey as yet resonates in that same register – that might invoke another sense of frame: to contrive events to ensure an outcome (as in ‘to frame a prizefight’) – but it does raise the question of whether there is something to be gained by shifting our attention away from Australian and fixing it more firmly on writer. To some extent, I believe that these essays as a whole go a long way towards doing just that, because, taken together, they begin to suggest that, given so many acute perspectives and fruitful points of view, there is something remarkable out there bearing the name “Peter Carey” – something we should attend to; something indeed fabulous.
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**Acknowledgements**

**This collection of essays** was a real challenge – not only because it involved the usual enthusing ups and nerve-wracking downs of organizing an international academic project, but rather, because it accompanied me through the process of becoming a father (Finn–Jonathan is now 8 months old), of building a house for my family, of seeing my wife through her final exams at uni, and myself through the final stages of my doctoral dissertation; it will hence always be part of my memories of this unforgettable time of my life.

My first thanks go out to my family, who were necessarily massively involved in this venture. Especially my wife Gloria, whose motherly endurance throughout many sleepless nights and sleepwalking (but joyful) days in these first months of parenthood enabled me to actually do my editorial work. Also, and importantly so, as fellow Australian literature enthusiast, she has been keeping watch on the sentences in this collection almost “like a steel nibbed kookaburra on the fences in the morning sun.” I also want to thank my parents for their methodological, technical, and culinary (!) support. And without the help of my parents-in-law, our house would still be a mere building-lot and the publication of this volume a long way off. Thank you!

Secondly, I would like to thank the editors of the Cross/Cultures series for their encouragement of my project. My special thanks go out to Dr Gordon Collier, whose critical as well as creative input has spiced up this collection, whose emails were a constant delight to read, and whose patience with me as novice editor was more than could be asked for – not to forget his advice in parental matters (“always hold the baby with its head close to your heart!”).

At Johannes Gutenberg-Universität I would like to thank my mentor Prof Dr Thomas Michael Stein, who has played an essential part in this collection and in my academic career so far. I am exceedingly grateful to him for setting me on the right academic track, for teaching me so much about the critical appreciation of literature and the estimation of British culture, and for his support, patience and encouragement over the last ten years. I also should like to
thank Prof Dr Bernhard Reitz for his support and advice in this project, Cyrus Patel for saving my life after a hard-disk crash, Wolfgang Thielen for his patient and scrupulous proofreading of the whole manuscript, and Willy Barth (the only person I know to be perfectly bilingual) for his comments on my essay contribution to this volume.

Dr Carolyn Bliss and Dr Nicholas Birns, then, stand out among overseas advisers (and friends) throughout this project. I want to thank Carolyn for her comments on my introduction to this volume and for her advice in all matters to do with reading and understanding Carey. It is with the same gratitude that I would like to mention Nicholas’s role in this undertaking: as experienced editor of *Antipodes*, he guided me through all sorts of difficulties and uncertainties, helped me to manage even the most sensitive issues, and thus saved my nerves (thank you also, Nick, for having the shortest email response times). And I want to use the occasion to thank both for the generous and warm-hearted welcome they spoke out to me (and to Gloria) as new member of the AAALS.

Next, I want to say ‘thank you’ to Peter Carey himself for the approval he showed towards this project, for his kind advice in all matters to do with publishing and copyright, and for the time he took for doing and editing the interview. I have met Peter three times over the last few years – for the first time when, as an undergraduate student, I sought to substantiate my thesis for the German *Staatsexamen* with some of the author’s thoughts about a novel he had written some fifteen years ago. I was so pleased (and surprised) when my letter to his New York address was answered, with an invitation to see him in Greenwich Village. Easy-going, unpretentious, friendly, with what I take to be a true-blue sense of humour – that’s how he presented himself to me. And lastly, I want to thank Peter for many entertaining hours over his books, which mean so much to me and to my wife. “A Letter to Our Son” even accompanied us to hospital when Finn–Jonathan was born.

And finally, I want to thank the Brun family for having provided me with a second home in Sydney ever since my first visit in 1992. I am particularly grateful to Maxi, who kindly answered my calls for a cover artist, and whose attempts at looking beyond the complications of mankind have surely altered my perception of the world.
Copyright information

Peter Carey’s fiction:

Novels:

*Bliss*: © Peter Carey 1981

*Oscar and Lucinda*: © Peter Carey 1988

*Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*: © Peter Carey 1997

*Illywhacker*: © Peter Carey 1985

*Jack Maggs*: © Peter Carey 1997

*True History of the Kelly Gang*: © Peter Carey 2000

*30 Days in Sydney*: © Peter Carey 2001

*My Life as a Fake*: © Peter Carey 2003

Short Stories

”Kristu-Du”: © Peter Carey 1994

”American Dreams”: © Peter Carey 1994

”War Crimes”: © Peter Carey 1994

Different versions of the following essays have been already published:

Nünning, Ansgar. “‘The Empire had not been built by choirboys’: Zur revisionistischen Darstellung australischer Kolonialgeschichte in Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda,*** Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht 27.3 (1994): 171–87.


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Introduction

1. ’tis thirty years since...

At the time this collection is being finalized, Peter Carey’s first published book, *The Fat Man in History* (1974), turns thirty. Its author’s arrival on the literary scene in the mid-1970s coincided with a period of momentous change in Australian culture and, more specifically, in the world of Australian letters. While Australians made their first tentative attempts at extending citizenship to immigrants of non-European background on a considerable scale (institutionalized by the gradual demise of the White Australia Policy), and while the Vietnam War showed the country once again the dire consequences of getting involved in someone else’s war, many of Australia’s foremost writers followed the example of Patrick White, who was famously “determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism”\(^1\) and led the way to a “‘new wave’”\(^2\) of Australian prose writing. Authors like Michael Wilding, Murray Bail, Peter Carey and Frank Moorhouse at the time seemed to find it increasingly hard to accommodate the experience of their changing environment to the narrative tradition of writers like Lawson, Furphy and Paterson. With their formal experiments and innovations in terms of subject-matter, the then literary avant-garde rebelled against the restrictions of the formulaic bush tales that had predominated in Australian fiction and overshadowed even the innovatory creative achievements of writers like White and Christina Stead. In order to overcome the creative impasse, they started to look abroad – to South America, for example, and the continent’s magical realists and fabulists (García Márquez and Borges have been mentioned again

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and again), or to North America’s postmodernists (Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon) and even back to Kerouac and the Beats.

Peter Carey was at the forefront of this movement of opposition against the “‘well rounded tale’ and the bush-realist ‘nationalist’ tradition in Australian fiction.” Reflecting on these years in a recent interview, Carey explained that at the time he found Australian literature “dull,” hence “developed a strong passion to make it new and fresh.” The experimental fantasy and science fiction of his short stories, which – in terms of style and subject-matter – represented a clear departure from the established literary tradition down under also attracted critical attention and earned him mostly favourable, sometimes celebratory, first critical appraisals and reviews. Craig Munro, for example, hailed him as “the most spectacular talent to emerge in the 1970s,” while Brian Kiernan (who saw Carey writing “pure fictions à la Borges”) and Bruce Bennett (who described Carey as a “true fabulator”) praised him as a herald of the new Australian literature. Against the background of Australian literary history, the terseness and economy of Carey’s early prose, the vague and apocalyptic settings that lack the recognizably Australian features of the traditional literature of the time, signified a radical departure from the “barren anecdotal realism of the local literature.” It also meant, significantly, a shift from the local to the international. Carey’s closest literary kin at the time – Kafka, Proust, Robbe–Grillet, Borges, Pynchon – indicate a global literary lineage; and the characters that people his short fictions, the Timoshenkos, Jorges, Oongalas, Ho-Chins and Da Silvas, document Australia’s transformation from a predominantly Anglo-Celtic society into a multicultural one.

While Carey abandoned the genre of short fiction after his second collection (War Crimes, 1979), the short stories do not stand apart from the rest of his fictions, for it is here that Carey first explores a wide range of concerns which have since reappeared again and again in his novels: we already find narratorial self-consciousness directed toward the writing process (eg, in “Concerning the Greek Tyrant”); an interest in the bizarre, the grotesque, the monstrous, which can be traced through Illywhacker (1985) and The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994) up to the recent My Life as a Fake (2003); a

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3 Gelder & Salzman, New Diversity, 14.
5 Morris Lurie’s highly dismissive review paragraph in the Nation Review (29 November 1974): 204, stands out as an exception here.
6 Munro, quoted in Gelder & Salzman, New Diversity, 15.
9 Murray Bail, quoted in Gelder & Salzman, New Diversity, 15.
critique of the excesses of capitalism or ‘late capitalism’, as one would have to say, with an eye to Carey as a postmodernist writer (eg, in “War Crimes”); fictional investigations into topical political questions such as the effects of American cultural imperialism (“American Dreams”) and of totalitarianism (“Kristu-Du,” “The Fat Man in History”); and finally, stories like “‘Do You Love Me?’” “Peeling,” and “The Chance,” which already contain a discourse on the frailty and constructedness of human identity.10

Carey’s generic turn from short to long prose allowed him to enlarge his postmodernist narratorial instrumentarium, which he had given first and sometimes extensive test-runs in the short stories, in the more generous space of the novel. Metafiction, for instance, resurfaces in practically all of his full-fledged fictions, most notably in *Illywhacker*, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *Jack Maggs* (1997), and *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000). The possibilities afforded by the novel form permit Carey to explore fully the critical potential of this self-consciousness. It is through his narrators’ self-awareness that he addresses such issues as the constructedness and arbitrariness of reality (past and present), that he puts doubtfulness in place of self-evidencies and old certainties, and that he constantly interrogates notions of truth and authenticity. And, in a context where linguistic constructs of all kinds are debunked, grand narratives (whether religion, imperialism, or ideologies such as the doctrine of racial superiority) are equally exposed as dangerous and oftentimes misleading.

These narratorial tactics serve a strategic cause; they help to prepare the ground for a critical interrogation of some of the most controversial issues in the Australian political fabric. There is, in fact, a political edge to practically all of Carey’s writings. In the short stories, in whose vague settings Australia featured as an idea or a concept rather than as a concrete place, Carey dealt with issues of a quite general and frequently universal nature – Australia was often only metaphorically implied. In the novels, however, Australia is insistently true, and is heated by the same debates as its extra-fictional model. Careyesque features such as self-consciousness, playing with reader expectations, a concern with authenticity and fakery, an obsession about lies and truths, all fall into place as components of a fictional discourse on controversial issues of Australia’s past and present – many of which are political pota-

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10 All of his fictions since *Bliss* can be read as explorations of personal and, by implication, national identity. This view is corroborated by Carey himself, who, in an interview with the BBC in 2001, said that “Almost everything I have ever written has been concerned with questions of ‘national identity’, a seemingly old-fashioned project that seems, to me, an alarmingly modern concern”; “Peter Carey: Australian Heavyweight,” *BBC News Online* 17 October 2001: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/entertainment/arts/newsid_1550000/1550985.stm>. 
toes of the hottest kind. Carey has proved to be a particularly astute observer of the political dimension of life. As Nicholas Birns rightly points out in his contribution to this volume, “few novelists, and very few of his level of quality, have registered the political developments of the last thirty years as keenly as has Carey.” Political undercurrents even run through the most playful of his fictions. Seemingly harmless episodes take on wider significance vis-à-vis issues like history, identity, reconciliation, or tax evasion. The consumption of American movies (in a short story like “American Dreams”), for example, is not simply a form of light entertainment; in the moral universe of the fiction it appears as a symptomatic acquiescence to US-style cocacolonization. Likewise, the doctrine of *terra nullius* is not merely a discursive parade-ground for an exclusive group of historians who seem to be forever quibbling with each other; rather, this legitimized fiction keeps coming to the surface in the narrative present of several of his works. In *Illywhacker*, it forms an integral part of the texture of Australian politics. In *30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account* (2001), the issue of Aboriginal firestick farming, which proves that the land was tended by its native inhabitants at the time of white arrival, heats up the “political climate” (41) of Carey’s Sydney and serves as an argumentational foil to his comments on reconciliation and Prime Minister Howard’s refusal to say “sorry.”

As one of Australia’s most outspoken critics, Carey regularly lives up to his creed that “No country wants writers who are brown-noses; you want writers who are critical, who are in some way at war with society,”11 launching broadsides against what he sees as his compatriots’ complacency, philistinism and small-mindedness. While such novels as *The Tax Inspector, Illywhacker* or *My Life as a Fake* indeed come across as intensely critical of what Carey, even after fifteen years in New York, still calls his home, there is, conversely, also a celebratory aspect to Carey’s oeuvre. Australia is always uppermost on his poetic agenda. In the words of fellow novelist Claire Messud, Carey’s “mission […] is no less than the writing of his beloved country, the voicing of Australia.”12 Where Carey leaves the continent in his fictions, heading for the USA (rather: Voorstand in *Tristan Smith*), England (in *Jack Maggs*), or Malaysia (in *My Life as a Fake*), it is not for the sake of literary or imaginary tourism. Rather, experiences abroad serve to highlight problems or conditions in Australia. His characters’ trips to the metropolitan centres of Voorstand or England, for instance, give the reader a better understanding of the mechanisms of colonization. In a similar manner, the exotic setting of his

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2003 novel can be read, by analogous conclusion, as a further comment on the Australian experience. The notorious poisoner Dato’s story of the Japanese invasion, for instance – “thinking how stupid we had been to rely on foreigners to protect us. I now understood that it was Malaya we should have trusted”13 – sounds remarkably like Herbert Badgery grappling with his compatriots’ gullibility: “It is why we believed the British when they told us we were British too, and why we believed the Americans when they said they would protect us.”14

Since Carey departs for new fictional terrain every time he sets out to write a novel, he has covered much of the geography of the Australian experience. His fictions chronicle his country’s history from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first and focus on key issues such as the convict system, the doctrine of terra nullius, the Kelly Outbreak, colonialism in its various stages, and national identity. Readers interested in the cultural history of Australia may therefore well read his eight novels as a fictional biography of his home country. In addition to the events in the unusual life of his biographee, there are deep probings into the nation’s trauma-ridden consciousness.15 Carey’s most recent novel, My Life as a Fake, for example, is concerned with the psychological effects of an unnatural birth, of contested parenthood, and of denied love – conditions all of which, by implication, also apply to Australian history. True History grants the readers glimpses into the psyche of a nineteenth-century Irishman, whose “brave parents was ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history,”16 and who himself was driven to outlawdom by the injustices of the British colonial administration. Little wonder, then – as Nicholas Jose points out in his essay – that the fictional biographer Carey has, in the eyes of his worldwide audience, come to represent Australia as Salman Rushdie does India or Margaret Atwood Canada.

Carey at present is Australia’s most widely-recognized contemporary writer. His long career, his popularity with reviewers and his appreciation by critics, along with his occasional involvement in current political debates, and perhaps his New York residence and the cosmopolitanism that is attributed to this, have all contributed to making him a literary heavyweight. When it comes to his fame, comparisons with Patrick White are unsurprisingly frequent. White, winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature, was the first

15 Although the term Vergangenheitsbewältigung can really only be applied to the context of German history, it is this sort of systematic attempt at coming to terms with the traumas of the past that animates many of Carey’s fictions.
writer in Australia’s literary history to achieve truly international fame. Carey can indeed claim to be the legitimate heir to White’s standing in the world of Australian literature. Carey’s reputation as one of the foremost Australian fiction-writers has likewise been made, or substantiated, to a considerable degree by literary prizes; he has won every major fiction award in Australia (the Miles Franklin three times), as well as major international prizes such as the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize (for *Jack Maggs*) and the Booker Prize, which he even won twice (for *Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History*). In the public perception of the literary phenomenon ‘Peter Carey’ the Booker stands out. There is, for example, hardly an essay, review or news item on Carey that fails to mention his double victory. Apart from cementing his position as one of the most highly regarded writers in the Commonwealth, Carey’s two Bookers have also greatly enhanced the reading public’s awareness of Australian literature in general.

**Carey, the Critics, and Carey Criticism**

Throughout his career, Carey has received ample attention from literary critics. There are four monographs, seven dissertations, dozens of chapters in academic publications, and a couple of hundred articles in scholarly journals and reviews in major world publications. Scholars from diverse quarters of the academy have dwelt on Carey (next to literary critics, mainly film critics, political scientists, historians, and fellow fiction-writers). Overall, his works have proved to be particularly approachable through late-twentieth-century critical theories, mainly postcolonial and postmodern. Scholars from postcolonial studies have been intrigued by his texts because of their decolonizing agenda. The novels critically examine political and cultural aspects of colonialism, consider the individual caught in the throes of coloniality, and bring up the issue of the genocide committed by white Australians against the indigenous population. Readings of Carey’s novels along the lines of postcolonial theory have time and again focused on their subversive potential, and have endeavoured to examine how Carey tests the validity of Western grand narratives and cultural conventions, particularly narrative ones. They have accordingly scrutinized the writer’s strategy of undermining Western conceptions of reality (for example, through what is commonly dubbed ‘magical realism’), of the novel form (his parodic rewriting of a classic Victorian novel in *Jack Maggs*, for example), of conventions to do with point of view and nar-

17 Apart from critical responses from within his home countries of Australia and the U.S.A., his work has also been discussed in Britain, Canada, India, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, France and Spain (for details, see the bibliography to this volume).
ratorial authority. Postmodern approaches have shared some of these interests, but have specialized in the element of playfulness that materializes in Carey’s fictions in the figure of trickster narrators, in deceiving interactions with the reader, in the element of parody and intertextuality, in metafictional strategies, and in his use of historiographic metafiction, that specifically postmodern genre of historical fiction. With their focus on language and the linguistic constructedness of categories foundational to the Western world, poststructurally influenced analyses have considered the way Carey handles the dichotomies of reality and fantasy, truth and fiction, authenticity and fakery. One might think that a certain staleness nowadays permeates this preoccupation with truth and untruth, that the wars about linguistic essentialism and Western profundity have been fought – that such finely differentiating poststructuralist knowledge persists merely as an intellectual indulgence. But binary thinking in categories of true and false continues to be operative in the popular imagination, perhaps today more than ever.18

There is a conspicuous congruence between the ascendance of the aforementioned ‘postist’ discourses in literary studies and Peter Carey’s emergence as a writer. His novels constitute a peculiar mix of both postmodern and postcolonial strategies, reminiscent of the ‘pocomo blend’ that has been detected in Salman Rushdie’s novels.19 Carey’s fictions have, accordingly, often been discussed in critical terms that combine postmodern and postcolonial reading strategies.20 While for critics the novels resonate with an awareness of postcolonial and postmodern concerns, the author himself is far less ready to subscribe to any such discourse. Although Carey has acknowledged his interest in postcolonial theory, explicitly so in the case of Edward Said’s *Culture and...*
Imperialism, he certainly does not approach his literary subjects from the angle of theory. As Theodore F. Sheckels puts it aptly in his observations on postmodernism writing, “The term ‘postmodern’ [...] is not necessarily a concept writers have in mind when they compose a poem or write a novel. Writers do not say to themselves ‘be postmodern’ and proceed accordingly.”

Carey illustrates just that: he is a writer of the postmodern age, with a postmodern intellectual’s hyper-awareness of the dangers of master-narratives and totalizing rhetoric. The same holds true for his view of postcolonialism: Carey grew up in a former settler colony; his senses sharpened from personal experience, and endowed with the gift of absorbing and reflecting like few others the state of Australian affairs, he transforms into fiction the same problematic that postcolonial theory formulates in critical terms. And while it is true that many of his novels address postcolonial issues in Australian culture, his fictions – as Bill Ashcroft argues with respect to Tristan Smith – enter critical discourse as writings that invite not only postcolonial readings, but also a “‘reading’ of contemporary cultural relations. It doesn’t simply propose a reading; it is a reading and, as such, enters, rather than exposes itself to, the field of theoretical discourse.”

Carey’s membership among postcolonial writers remains ambiguous, though. If understood as a counterdiscourse aimed at resistance and change, the label ‘postcolonial’ would become problematic because of Carey’s implication in the very system he sets out to criticize. Yet only a few postcolonial theorists (Aijaz Ahmad, for instance) operate from outside the Western system they write about. Even Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Abdul JanMohamed, Homi Bhabha, Peter Nazareth, all of whom were born in the former colonies, chose to teach and conduct research in the West. Hence, it is hardly contestable to classify Carey’s writings as postcolonial – as part of a discourse de facto at home on Western campuses – especially if postcolonial discourse is understood as an activity of exploratory reading and writing that sets out to disrupt the Western master-narrative. Also, as Stephen Slemon argues in his 1990 essay “Unsettling the Empire,” it is of little service to limit the idea of anticolonial resistance to the Third and Fourth Worlds, as

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22 See Sheckels, this volume.

23 Birns, in his analysis of the short story “Kristu-Du” (see below), diagnoses the same reciprocal relationship with regard to postmodernism: “‘Kristu-Du,’ for example, is quintessentially postmodernist: Carey, who learned so much from postmodern theory in writing [...] Tristan Smith [...] here shows that postmodern theory could have learned a lot from him. All these [postmodern] concepts are latent in this short Australian story of the early 1970s.”

this would bring about “two forms of displacement”: “First, all literary writing which emerges from these cultural locations will be understood as carrying a radical and contestatory content,” and secondly, “the idea will be discarded that important anti-colonialist literary writing can take place outside the ambit of Third- and Fourth-World literary writing.”

Slemon consequently lists Peter Carey among those writers from a postcolonial background whose work exemplifies the “necessary entanglement of anti-colonial resistances within the colonialist machineries they seek to displace.”

As a writer interested in questions that have animated postcolonial discourse ever since its inception in the mid-1980s, his intimate knowledge of three Anglo-Celtic cultures – the predominantly British one of his childhood and his days at Geelong Grammar, Australia’s Eton; the Australian one of his early adulthood; the North American one since 1989 – makes him ideally suited to observe postcolonial relevance. It affords him a privileged perspective on British–Australian relations, but also, and importantly so lately, enables him to fictionalize neocolonial mechanisms of cultural imperialism as practised by the USA. The persistence of American cultural and political domination at a time when many of the decolonized countries of the former British Empire are slowly maturing into their postcoloniality makes the interrogative activity and thematic concerns of postcolonial criticism more relevant than ever. Amidst announcements of the imminent demise of postcolonialism, this relocation of postcolonial concerns also proves the ongoing vitality and relevance of the discourse.

While Carey has explicitly acknowledged his approval of postcolonial approaches, he has never explicitly done so with regard to postmodern or post-structural theory. This, of course, does not mean that postmodern approaches to his writings are less valid; nor does it mean that his writings are not postmodern. As outlined above, his writerly strategies and the style and form of his writings even make Carey’s works quintessentially postmodern. Additionally, his complicity with the dominant discursive regimes of his society

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26 Slemon, “Unsettling the Empire,” 110.

27 Among the recent challengers of postcolonial discourse are Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, in Empire (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2000), and E. San Juan, Jr. – see especially his After Postcolonialism: Remapping Philippines–United States Confrontations (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

28 For example, in an email to the author; see also the above-mentioned interviews by Birns and Powells.Com.
(Carey being male and white) suggests a sort of structural postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon explains in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, “Wilfully contradictory […] postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within.”

In general, Carey seems wary of readings clotted with trendy, theoretical jargon, readings that fail to penetrate to the heart of the narrative achievement – as is often the case with analyses which use the primary text only to illustrate the mechanisms of a certain theoretical concept. In interviews, he again and again complains about critics who in their attempts at clever readings fail to see what he is actually doing artistically. Given the present devaluation of literature, Carey’s call for a “return to the old-fashioned close-reading of texts” might therefore not only be his rescue plan for “keeping literature alive,” but also an attempt to protect himself from being appropriated by obfuscatory forms of academic discourse.

The present collection of essays is the first of its kind. Despite the fact that much research has already been done on Carey, and although there are collections of critical essays on a good many of the major contemporary writers, no collection of critical perspectives has as yet been put together on Carey. *Fabulating Beauty: Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey* is an international and interdisciplinary project that pays heed to the worldwide scholarly interest in Carey as well as to the eclecticism of scholarly approaches to his fictions. Contributors to *Fabulating Beauty* come from five countries on three continents and bring to this collection their specialist knowledge in fields as varied as contemporary cultural and literary theory, history, theology, film, and architecture. The aim was not to assemble a ‘best-of’ collection of thirty

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30 See, for example, “The ‘contrarian streak’,” in the present volume, below.
32 The same wariness towards academia also animates a number of the characters in his fictions. Herbert Badgery indulges in thumbing his nose at his academic readership repeatedly throughout the text (386, 490, 561) while the first-person narrator of “War Crimes” even engages in a sort of intellectual-bashing (310). It is in the same frame of mind that Carey’s narrator in *Tristan Smith* parodies the scientific style of his academic colleagues by rigging up his narrative with footnotes and a critical apparatus attached to its end.
years of Carey criticism; rather, *Fabulating Beauty* wishes to acquaint its readers with *current* critical perspectives of a representative choice of critics who have left their mark on Carey criticism over the past three decades. All of the contributors share a long-standing interest in Carey, and most have already published substantial criticism on him. Of the four authors of monographs on Carey, three are represented here with new essays. Of the twenty essays, seventeen are hitherto unpublished; the remaining three (those by Nünning, Pierce and Edwards) were either translated (in the case of Nünning) or updated and revised (all three) for the occasion.33

As for the organization of this collection, the essays in the first two sections (Part I: *The Writer and His Work* and Part II: *Aspects and Overviews*) cover issues of a general nature, relevant to several or all of the author’s fictions. The second part consists of readings that focus on individual works. All of Carey’s fictions are covered; *The Tax Inspector* does not have a whole essay dedicated to it, but is discussed at some length by Christer Larsson and Carolyn Bliss.

In assembling this collection, care has been taken to present as broad an overview of Carey’s oeuvre as possible. Part I considers the author and his work and takes cognizance of the fact that in the critical reception of Carey’s fiction the figure of the real-life author has become increasingly prominent.34 In the interview published here, I tried to cover as much ground as possible, presenting to readers Carey’s positions on subjects that have long intrigued the author and his characters, but also his critics: his concept of history; the notorious denial of certain parts of the Australian self, especially those reflecting or arising out of the Australian past; the figure of Ned Kelly and his position as a national icon; British–Australian cultural relations; the writer’s “contrarian streak” and connected issues such as unreliable narration (ie, taking liberties with historical facts and reader-expectations); and his relationship to literary criticism and reviewers. Karen Lamb, in her essay, continues the work begun in her monograph *Peter Carey: The Genesis of Fame*. She looks at the role of the Booker Prize in Carey’s career and discusses how the media have presented him “as an enduring symbol of ‘Australianness’ (a ‘postcolonial exotic’).” But the Booker, although it has brought important ‘ex-centric’
writers to the attention of a large audience hitherto unfamiliar with writings by the likes of Keri Hulme, Thomas Keneally or Arundhati Roy, is not undisputed among scholars. There is, Lamb argues, a certain conservatism ingrained in the prize, for the revisionist and anti-imperialist fictional histories the Booker panel propagates actually “appeal to Booker-preferred notions of ‘mythic’ and ‘epic’ and ‘experimental’ – the [Malcolm] Bradbury formula.”

Part III features essays on general aspects and themes in Carey’s fictions. In my own essay contribution (“Towards an Alphabet of Australian Culture: Peter Carey’s Mythistorical Novels”), I take up the author’s lament that Australia essentially lacks culture, stories, myths. The novels under scrutiny (Bliss, True History, My Life as a Fake) are read as both comments on the state of mythogenesis in Australia and as ingredients of a nascent mythology progressing one step towards what George Steiner memorably called the “alphabet of culture”: a country’s stories, sagas, myths. Peter Pierce discusses one of the most conspicuous motifs in Carey’s fictions (and in postcolonial literatures in general): that of captivity. While Pierce analyses the novels and the occurrence of various forms of captivity in them, Cornelia Schulze (in the next section) does so with regard to the short prose (mainly in “American Dreams,” “War Crimes,” “Life and Death in the South Side Pavilion” and “Peeling”). Theodore F. Sheckels’ essay concentrates on the postmodernity of Carey’s fictions and the problems this entails for film adaptations (namely, of Bliss, the short story “Crabs,” and Oscar and Lucinda) – which, because of the visual imperatives of their medium, necessarily reflect a different aesthetic. Christer Larsson, in his careful reading of several Carey novels (among them The Tax Inspector, Bliss, Illywhacker, Oscar and Lucinda), shows that Carey’s novels, upon closer inspection, are more firmly rooted in the Christian tradition than the author’s self-conception as “‘an atheist’” and the postcolonial condemnation of totalizing, essentialist narratives would lead one to believe.

Part III starts out with two essays on the short stories, which – although much praised by everybody who does study them – have been somewhat neglected in Carey criticism. Schulze, as mentioned above, considers situations of confinement, laying special emphasis on Carey’s strategy of entrapping his readers in narrative labyrinths, a manoeuvre she sees as having a didactic purpose: that of increasing one’s awareness of linguistic manipulation. Like Schulze, Nicholas Birns examines a theme that has continued to play a role in the fictions far beyond the short stories: architecture. In “‘A Dazzled Eye’: ‘Kristu-Du’ and the Architecture of Tyranny,” he considers the “concrete political circumstances of both setting and production [of Carey’s fictions]” and accordingly analyses the architect Gerrard Haflinger’s eponymous dome,
the “Kristu-Du,” as the author’s real and metaphoric illustration of political repression.

Bliss (1980), Carey’s first novel, is the subject of Nicholas Jose’s essay. Jose, as fellow novelist, considers Carey’s position in the world of Australian letters, recalling the cultural atmosphere of the early 1980s, when Bliss was first published. From Jose’s critical appraisal Carey emerges not only as a “literary Houdini” but also as a writer whose fictions “broke new ground” at the time, signifying a “break from the shackling domination of literary London.”

Illywhacker, Carey’s tour-de-force sweep through roughly 150 years of Australian history, is—like all the fictions that followed—radically different from its predecessor in terms of subject-matter and narrative form and style. With its emphasis on building and architectural metaphors as well as its narrative self-consciousness, the novel offers itself for a reading in poststructurally influenced terms, as Brian Edwards does in his contribution to the volume. In his essay, he considers the novel as “an exercise in bricolage,” a demonstration of postmodernist playfulness, where history “receives a deconstructive shot” and established notions about authorship are delicensed.

Carey revisits quite a few of the literary-theoretical concerns of Illywhacker in Oscar and Lucinda, but packages them in an entirely different narrative form. Lyn McCredden and Ansgar Nünning both address concerns in Oscar and Lucinda that had already animated Illywhacker’s potential for cultural criticism: namely, the question of how European discourses fare when transplanted to the Antipodes. While Nünning explores the postmodern and postcolonial concept of history underlying the novel and shows how Carey, through formal, thematic and theoretical manoeuvres, renews the genre of the historical novel as such and re-examines received notions of Australian history, McCredden analyses how Carey handles ‘sacredness’ in the context of a novel that is largely informed by the postcolonial view of Christendom as an essentially alien presence in the Australian context.

The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith—considered by some critics as Carey’s best novel to date—is of central importance in this collection of essays with its emphasis on issues turning on the repercussions of colonialism within the settler-colonial context of Australia. As Bill Ashcroft explains in his contribution, “Simulation, Resistance and Transformation,” Tristan Smith is Carey’s “liveliest and most unrelenting reflection on the postcolonial dilemma of Australian society. No other contemporary novel addresses so many postcolonial issues in Australian culture.” Ashcroft focuses on the postcolonial struggle over representation as it is played out in the novel and presents a reading in Baudrillardian terms, looking at the novel’s “consuming cultural thesis […]
that all culture, identity, and the power relationships they invoke are a product of simulation.”

*The Big Bazoohley* (1995), Carey’s excursion into children’s literature, is discussed by Pam Maclntyre, who explores new terrain in Carey criticism; except for Anthony Hassall’s essay on the book and the odd paragraph in monographs (eg, in Woodcock and Larsson) and other critical articles, this genre has been left to reviewers. McIntyre shows how Carey, in what upon closer inspection turns out to be a “remarkably complex” children’s book, traces many of the determinants that make up the life of his adult figures in the world of children. The protagonist Sam’s ‘normality’, for example, “involves acceding to what capitalist, imperialist society decrees.” The world of children emerges as no less haunted by such curses as “rapacious capitalism,” “deceptive appearances,” and acts of colonization (in a transferred sense, the Perfecto Kiddo competition can be read as the “symbol of colonized childhood”) than that of Carey’s adult characters.

The 1997 novel *Jack Maggs* is one of Carey’s most popular fictions. The general public delights in it as a Victorian-style page-turner, while the critical establishment enjoys the novel’s intertextual dialogue with Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (and the writer’s biography) and its explorations of cultural trauma. Barbara Schmidt–Haberkamp and Annegret Maack’s essays are companion pieces; both explore the relation between Carey’s “twentieth-century, postcolonial Dickens novel” (Maack) and the nineteenth-century pre-text. Maack, in her essay, demonstrates how the postcolonial writer Carey appropriates the imperial narrative and transforms it by an act of postcolonial rewriting into “an Aussie story.” Schmidt–Haberkamp takes a different tack through Carey’s intertextual strategies. In her reading of the novel, she shows how in Carey’s novel the sequence of original text and postcolonial reaction to it, which is central to the writing-back paradigm, are inverted. The third essay in this section, “Unsettling Illusions: Carey and Capital in *Jack Maggs*” by Bruce Woodcock, is also dedicated to intertextual relations, this time between *Jack Maggs* and Karl Marx’s *Capital*. Woodcock demonstrates how Carey (as he so often does) “goes to the heart of the contradictions of industrial capitalism” and in so doing explores the “relationship with colonialism and the paradoxical retaliation of the colonies […] in terms that are analogous to the vivid imagery of Karl Marx’s classic.”

*True History of the Kelly Gang*, the novel that won Carey his second Booker, is the focus of essays by Carolyn Bliss and Susan K. Martin. As a novel that claims to offer the ‘true history’ of Australia’s most legendary outlaw, *True History* has intrigued critics and reviewers alike, and has brought Ned Kelly back onto the agenda of general cultural and identity-related discourse in Australia. Carolyn Bliss approaches the novel on a well-trodden
path of Carey criticism, that of storytelling and narrative, but sets off to explore new ground by analysing how cultural master-plots (narrative patterns which inform a culture’s identity and understanding of itself) function in the novel. Susan K. Martin reads the novel as an exemplar of a particular subset of Australian historical fiction, novels that stage a search for white male heterosexual heroes. Kelly is a particularly interesting example, because his whiteness and maleness, along with his heterosexuality and his heroism, have been more or less vehemently contested (and continue to be so in the novel).

In Carey’s oeuvre, the fictional memoir 30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account (2001) stands out as the book in which the author Peter Carey is more directly graspable than anywhere else in his fictions. The narrator “Peter Carey” in 30 Days offers his views on issues such as the problematic of the Stolen Generation, terra nullius and other aspects of Australian history and identity directly attributable to the real-life author behind the book (that is, to judge from Carey’s public utterances). But the reader once again must heed Herbert Badgery’s caveat lector from Illywhacker, for – as Anthony J. Hassall shows in his essay – Carey in 30 Days once again engages in the “intricacies” of the lie; he thus explores “aspects of Australia’s story […] via distortions which defamiliarize his subjects, thereby enabling his readers to see them free of those other distortions naturalized by habit and convention.”

My Life as a Fake, despite the fact that it presents a departure in terms of setting and theme, still feels familiar, not least because, as Robert Macfarlane explains, there is a good deal of “epistemological blurriness” in the novel regarding notions of authorship and originality. In this respect, Macfarlane argues, “My Life as a Fake represents the climax of a conceit with which Carey has long been fascinated: that lies, hoaxes, and fakes are, at their most successful, deeply creative forms of expression.” My Life as a Fake, the critic points out, thus not only sums up some of Carey’s writerly preoccupations. Its literary-philosophical thesis – that “under careful scrutiny the apparent opposition between ‘making’ and ‘faking’ collapses into near-identity, that fakery of some sort is a normative and necessary condition of literary creation, and that repetition is the first making and plagiarism the unoriginal sin” – is also at the heart of a “mini-tradition of recent anglophone fiction.”

The bibliography, which features over 1,300 items, is the most comprehensive to date. It considers publications from Australia and New Zealand, the USA, Canada, India, South Africa, several European countries (Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden) and South America. In compiling it, I have considered academic and non-academic sources: monographs, dissertations, articles in scholarly periodicals and journals, and reviews in major world newspapers. The amount of critical response here assembled attests to the importance of
Carey both as a writer for the general audience (virtually all of the major English-language newspapers review his novels) and for a more highbrow academic readership. Firmly settled in the canon of contemporary fiction, and taught at high schools and in university English departments worldwide, Carey today is the most widely commented-on living Australian author.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{ANDREAS GAILE}

\textbf{WORKS CITED}


\textsuperscript{35} That is, to judge from the number of items listed in databases such as the MLA, AustLit, Lexis-Nexis or a search engine like Google. AustLit, for example, lists almost 300 items of criticism on Carey. Patrick White, with more than 800 critical items in AustLit, is still unrivalled, though. Thanks to Robert Zeller for his help with the research here.


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PART I:
The Writer and his Work
GAILE: Out of the nine novels you have so far published, five could be classified as historical novels – of course, ones of a particularly postmodern brand, whether you call them historiographic metafictions, factions, histories or anything of the sort. Why do you again and again decide to write about the Australian past with so much happening in present-day Australia? I’m thinking of reconciliation, the Republican Movement and so on.

CAREY: Within the question lies the argument that Shakespeare could have been doing more socially meaningful things than writing Richard III. But of course we all know it’s a work of art, and we don’t wish it to be investigative reporting, or even history. Do you go to Richard III to find out what really happened? No, you go to it because it’s great literature, and because of this it can be used as a lens through which to look at Shakespeare’s time or our own. The utilitarian view of literature is useful in the case of journalism, history, philosophy, but it doesn’t seem a productive way for this novelist to think. Of course we’re all passionately concerned by the politics of the present. And it would be a very narrow pedestrian reader who could not see the relevance of Jack Maggs to the Republican Movement, for instance, or to see that Oscar and Lucinda or even Illywhacker might illuminate, and be illuminated by, the issue of reconciliation. It’s trite, but important, to also remember that the present always has its feet in the past. In Australia, where the past has been the subject of denial and memory-loss, it’s essential, it seems to me, to go back to the past and try and untangle all the lies we’ve told and been told. I think we’ve often been incredibly lazy. Ned Kelly is a really good example. At the time I announced my intention to tackle him, many of my friends said, “oh well, we know all about Ned Kelly!” Well, of course we didn’t.
Setting out to write *True History*, I wanted to make something really beautiful, something that had never existed in the world before, with sentences that had grown out of our soil even though they had never been written or even thought before. And, of course, I wanted to look at the past, not to escape, but to illuminate our present. Just take a look at Penn Station (where we both were today): there are parts of the old McKim building still there. The whole thing of looking at the past of Penn Station is not only to do with the destruction of the beautiful building that was there before, but to examine the rise of the automobile, the life of Robert Moses, the designer Raymond Loewry, the tunnels of New York, the Eagle as an imperial symbol, the baths of Caracalla in ancient Rome, the gangs of Hell’s Kitchen, not to mention all the movies shot in the old Pennsylvania Station or Faulkner’s short story of the same name. There’s a dizzy web of interconnectedness produced by the physical linking between past and present.

**Gaile:** That’s also what you are saying so pointedly in *30 Days in Sydney* – that the past keeps coming to the surface, that it’s ever-present, in a way.

**Carey:** In Europe you think history is everywhere about you, whereas in Australia you tend to think it’s not, but in fact it’s right in your fucking face. It’s so easy to not see it, but once you do see it, it’s magical and amazing. For instance, the Pacific Highway follows a ridge; it’s quite likely that that was a walking-path well before white people arrived, and here is this modern road following a decision made by bare Aboriginal feet.

**Gaile:** That reminds me of the Tank Stream, which you mention in *Illywhacker* and *30 Days*, and its function as a signpost to the past.

**Carey:** It was fun for *30 Days* to have a reason to go down there. I went down there with Murray Bail. Really the most interesting thing was the strong fresh perfume of insecticide. Cockroaches had been slaughtered just for us!

**Gaile:** Do you know Peter Ackroyd’s biography of London? He has a whole chapter on London’s subterranean streams.

**Carey:** Ackroyd’s an amazing writer; but yes, certainly, it’s nice to have an excuse to do those sorts of things.

**Gaile:** Your concept of history is one of the issues in your fictions critics have most often commented on. Do you subscribe to a particular school and think any one approach is especially worthwhile and fruitful? Any work of theory of history or culture that fascinated you in particular?
CAREY: Oh, you are probably so much more aware of what I’ve read and thought than I am.

GAILE: Are you, for example, aware of twentieth-century historiographic concepts from France which have been trying to chart the mentalities of the silent majority in history, or look at the history of everyday life? Historians of that school make it a point not to write exclusively about the great men in history, as Carlyle had demanded it. Might Herbert Badgery’s comment that he’d much rather fill his history with great men and women than with the vicissitudes of his own life be an ironic comment on this?

CAREY: The whole Australian experience makes one suspicious of great men, and therefore one thinks of oneself as not even potentially a great man or great person or great woman or great anything. Great men and women exist in other places, far away. Our historical experience encourages us to believe that history is made by ordinary people. If I think like this, I’m merely a product of my place.

GAILE: Looking at your fictions, I think it’s more than just accidental that heroes or, in general, history-makers are virtually absent, or, if present, their position as heroes is disavowed.

CAREY: I think that’s not quite true, because there’s Ned Kelly. In an Australian context Ned Kelly is certainly a hero; he is an important person.

GAILE: Talking about Ned Kelly: some reviewers have chided you for having portrayed a too celebratory picture of Kelly. Did you try to invest him also with a quality that would tell people to beware of him as a madman, a megalomaniac?

CAREY: I think he finally did become mad, but that is hardly the central issue, at least not to me. Of course, people in Europe and particularly in Britain seem to feel more comfortable reading this novel as a sort of revisionist history – all my sympathy for this criminal, they deduce, must be new, something I have introduced. In fact, it is a totally typical and predictable Australian response. I really do think that Ned Kelly was a decent person. For a so-called violent outlaw there’s very little violence in the story: I think his defence of his actions at Stringybark Creek is not only believable but, in the broader context, absolutely correct. If the police had taken the lives of the Kelly boys they would have been heroes and would have got a pay-rise. It’s a tragic situation. You have these well-intentioned Land Acts – Charles Gavan Duffy’s Land Acts – which produce circumstances in which few of the intended beneficiaries can be said to benefit. They, the poor selectors, had no
capital; they were ordered to grow wheat where wheat could never thrive; they were doomed to poverty, always living under the threat of government repossession of their property. Well, how are they going to cope? How are they going to feed themselves and their families? It’s as if you were robbed, right now, and thrown out onto the streets of Hell’s Kitchen, and you have no money and no one will talk to you. I mean, you’ve got to do something to live and eat. And they were tough people. And the police were demonstrably and obviously corrupt. So I don’t see myself as having sentimentalized Kelly – I think he behaved rather well. Of course, he was part of the criminal under-class. And of course, he was a nineteenth-century Irishman and his racial attitudes were consistent with his time and class. I’ve got to grasp my history, like a nettle. If you’re German, there are things you’ve got to grasp about your history, and there’re many painful things we’ve got to grasp in ours.

GAILE: On the last pages of the novel you have Ned even comparing himself to King Henry V.

CAREY: Remember that it’s the schoolteacher Curnow who persuades him of this, and there is more driving this scene than grandiosity: there is a man of some education flattering a man with very little. Nor do I think it unreasonable, on the night before a big battle, that Ned would easily be moved by and identify with the speech.

GAILE: And if you think of the iron armour, did he really think he was going to be invincible?

CAREY: I don’t think I dealt with the armour as well as I might have, and my failure to engage with what seems to be a fundamental flaw in its design – the absence of any leg-protection – still agitates me. Ned certainly doesn’t think of himself as a romantic knight in armour. He’s a man of flesh and blood, facing modern weapons, and thinking about how he is going to defend himself. Looking for the seed of his idea of armour, I looked into the history of tanks, wondering if tanks had been invented in the 1870s. Well, they hadn’t been. But there had been American ironclad ships, the Monitor and the Merrimac. They were famous. Images of them had been in the Australian newspapers. So I think it’s not an unreasonable inspiration; but who would know? The armour, of course, still seems mad, but these were not stupid people. So why did they leave their legs so unprotected? It’s only recently that I’ve thought of a solution: their plan, perhaps, was to kneel behind a low barrier of felled trees: three men at the front and one to protect the rear. It would make sense, right? they’d be like a tank.
GAILE: In your fictions you often present competing versions of one and the same event – if, for example, you think of *My Life as a Fake*, where McCorkle offers his own ‘true’ history of Weiss’s death against the official version of it. The same we have in *True History*, of course, but also in *Jack Maggs* and in *Illywhacker*. Is that something that just so happens, or do you do that consciously because you think that history ought to be a multiperspectival discourse? Is it therefore something you do programmatically?

CAREY: *As I Lay Dying*, with its conflicting points of view, had a huge effect on me. And, in a funny sort of way, cubism presents its truth like this. To me it’s simply a representation of reality. And it’s always like that – we’re both experiencing this conversation now, but what I think I’m saying to you and what you’re hearing are two different things. So it seems reasonable to represent that. Of course, it’s arrived at intuitively and compulsively, rather than systematically.

GAILE: You said a few minutes ago that there are a number of issues in Australian history which need revision and rethinking because they have been denied.

CAREY: Australian history is filled with denial and false consciousness. I grew up thinking that we were English; my grandfather called England home. And somehow, when we imagined the convicts and soldiers, we always placed ourselves on the soldier’s side of the experience. We thought the convicts were nothing to do with us. Later I came to believe that the convict experience was central in the formation of Australia. And, you know, the convict experience makes itself felt in so many things, not least the very particular nature of our lovely idiosyncratic Australian English.

Another thing is the narrative of how the nation was born, how we gained our land. We told ourselves it was not farmed, not being used. We told ourselves that unlike the Maoris in New Zealand – who famously resisted – the Aboriginals didn’t fight at all. But of course they did; there were these fierce wars fought all over the country. People of my age grew up in total ignorance of this.

Australia is also filled with stolen children – first and most importantly, Aboriginal children who were taken from their families, in a deliberate policy of pursuing the policy of ‘breeding-out’ Aboriginal skin colour and features. Kim Scott, the Western Australian writer, deals very elegantly and emotionally with this. But also, there were children from England who were removed from their families and sent to Dr Barnardo Homes. I think the copyright of the photograph on the English edition of *Jack Maggs* is owned by Dr Barnardo’s. These kids were not orphans, but children of living parents, and they
were removed and shipped to Australia. There are so many secret histories at every level. Look, for example, at Alison’s great-grandfather. He was a Captain Edwards, and he was a straight, upstanding white colonial, always known as Captain, which tells you something about him. And later it was discovered that Captain Edwards had another family entirely – he had an Aboriginal family. Kim Scott and I were recently in India, where we did a number of readings and lectures, and I took my younger son along. I said to him: you see, Charley, the interesting thing is that you have Aboriginal relations. And he does, because his great-grandfather had an Aboriginal family. And this sort of thing is secret in families forever. It takes two or three generations for people to even acknowledge that something might have happened. And so there are a lot of secrets in Australia which are important to understand.

I also think I have a mischievous streak in me: “You think you know what happened? Let me tell you: it wasn’t like that at all”; and that comes from something far less principled – a contrarian streak. And sometimes I do that sort of thing just to make the story work. For instance, in *Illywhacker* there’s a passage where they listen to the wireless, and later I found out that there was no wireless in Geelong at that particular time, so I thought: what I am going to do? Because my narrator is a liar, I have a chapter beginning: “They’ll tell you there was no wireless in Geelong and so on, but I’ll tell you they’re wrong.” So sometimes I use that inclination, but it’s fun, and the reader understands very well – it’s not to deceive the reader, it’s just to make the story work. But yes, I have a contrarian tendency.

**GAILE:** And that’s what’s so good about writing historical fiction: no one could really prove you wrong, for who is going to prove to you that there was no wireless, if we take that example.

**CAREY:** About the wireless? I am clearly wrong. That’s apparent the minute you read the sentence. But the story of Ned Kelly is filled with unmapped and unrecorded time. So much is based on our limited understanding of dialogue recorded by courts and policemen. And there are so many different ways the evidence on record might be interpreted. So I’m having fun, I’m being mischievous, just like I am with the radio in Geelong, but with a more serious intent, I hope. I’m saying to my readers: “We don’t know what really happened. There are so many different ways to think about what happened out there in the unrecorded historical dark. Here, look at this: I’ve made it up, but it’s consistent with the facts.” So, firstly, I enjoy that, I’ve taken a little snippet of history and given it a totally new interpretation, and then I’ve done this, and anybody who knows the recorded history will enjoy this, I hope. But it does ask a very serious question of the serious reader: have you even bothered to imagine other possibilities, or have you even bothered to ask why Con-
stable Fitzpatrick was Ned’s friend, which the so-called histories report time and time again, but what does that mean? Why was it so? How was it so? And if it was so, what else might it suggest?

GAILE: Do your unreliable narrators also come from this contrarianism, or from your project of delicensing historical narratives?

CAREY: We’re all unreliable narrators. I mean, if there is a God, God could be a reliable narrator, but no-one else. So I don’t think they are actually driven by contrarian impulse. If I think about it: is Jack Maggs driven by my contrarian impulse? No. Is Ned Kelly driven by contrarian impulse? No, not at all. I mean, both are passionately serious about presenting themselves. And are they totally reliable? Well, probably not. Who could be reliable? In the context of a novel with an omniscient narrator, people want to have some stabilizing force in the narrative, and they want to know who they can trust, or what they cannot trust. An unreliable narrator is fine as long as, in the end, you see the degree of their unreliability. If that’s left out, if that remains a mystery, readers seem to become uneasy. For me, it’s not really an issue. But I’ve never forgotten reader-response to my novel The Tax Inspector. People keep on trying to decide which of my characters is the morally reliable force, but alas, there’s nobody who is morally reliable. There are readers who think Benny is going to be innocent, and then they find he’s evil. And then they jump to Maria and find out she’s fallible too, because she wants to be in love with Jack Catchprice, but how can she be? For some readers this was obviously very disturbing; I didn’t (don’t) share their expectations, I suppose.

GAILE: Let’s talk about your relation with literary critics. Would you agree that, to tell from your writings – I’m thinking of Illywhacker, for example – it is somewhat uneasy?

CAREY: There’s no doubt that when I was first published I felt rather threatened by literary critics. And also, I’ve had some very bad personal experiences with academia. One of the more traumatic was being shortlisted for the Stanford writing scholarship in Melbourne in the early 1960s. I knew the prize would change my life, send me out of Australia, put me in a testing environment, and even now I know I wasn’t wrong to see how high the stakes were. Finally the day came. I opened a door in the English Department at Melbourne University and there, gathered around a huge table, were my judges: the professor of history, the professor of English and so on. And they were patronizing and dismissive from the very start, and of course they gave the prize to someone who talked their language – a nice man, by the way, a BA Honours student. But I was really hurt and humiliated. Of course, all
these years later, I am a successful writer with an international reputation, and no-one has even heard of the other guy. But when you’re twenty-one, you don’t forget those hurts. There’s a line in “War Crimes” that goes something like: “may you feast on this and cover it with your fucking idiot footnotes,” which was probably born of that experience. I’m not sure that it is, but it probably was.

I have certainly, for many many years, known that academic reading is just that – a reading. Academic readers, like civilian readers, bring their life and experience to the page, and if that includes literary theory and five million cross-textual connections, so be it. When I was very young and read academic writing about, say, Bliss I’d think, “oh, you idiot, you are so, so wrong.” But by the time of Illywhacker I had come to understand that it is readers who make books and that well-read intellectual readers bring all of their intelligence and reading to the page, and so I am very at home, actually grateful, for my more literary readers.

Herbert Badgery, of course, has some of his roots in that room at Melbourne University. And I can certainly use the trauma of that day to invent a character. But if you’re asking me, do I feel antagonism towards careful, intelligent reading? Am I at war with the angels? No.

Gaile: You wouldn’t have come to the AAALS conference today, that’s for sure!

Carey: Well, thank God for the AAALS. Of course, that is not to say that some amazingly stupid, arrogant, spiteful, small-minded things are not written about my work. But is spitefulness unique to the world of literature? No, of course not.

Gaile: Talking about academic readings of your works: a short while ago I read an interview you recently did with Robert Birnbaum in which you talked about My Life as a Fake and the reviews for that novel.

Carey: Oh, what did I say? I shouldn’t have done that. I talked about Terrence Rafferty (who had given me a very nice review in the New York Times) and I said he should just fucking relax; that was ungrateful and impolite, but not untrue. Intelligent readers can sometimes get themselves in such a state. There’s a line in “War Crimes” (or perhaps it’s Illywhacker) that says: “just relax and enjoy the show”; well, it’s true. Reviewers are so worried they are going to miss something. And when they write about Jack Maggs, for instance, they spend all their energies showing that they get the Dickens references. Well, of course the references are there; but they are hardly the centre of the book. Terrence Rafferty is a really smart man, of course, but no-one
was trying to pull a three-card trick. He worries that I’m making a reference to “Pierre Menard,” the story by Borges. Actually, he’s the one who makes the reference. Which is his right, but all the text says is that Bob McCorkle has performed a fake poem in a way that gave it authenticity. This is a moment that any actor would understand immediately. Sometimes the more obvious reading is the one that serves the work most subtly.

GAILE: But if you look, for example, at a novel like My Life as a Fake, there are dozens of references to writings from the literary canon, and the way you employ them tells me that you know a good deal about them.

CAREY: Well, do I know all about horses just because they crop up in my writings from time to time?

GAILE: You’re right, but the way you use them tells me that you don’t simply drop a writer’s name; you use that particular writer for a very particular reason and know about the significance of that person’s writings in the given context.

CAREY: Well, I hope so.

GAILE: Let’s take Stefan George as an example.

CAREY: It’s like the horse stuff: if you want to know about horses, you go to a horse trainer and talk to riders, so if you want to know about George’s work…. However, there are other poets, like Pound, for instance, who I’ve read all my life, so you may decide to think about that differently.

GAILE: Talking about My Life as a Fake: did you know that Detective Vogelesang was still alive?

CAREY: I’ll tell you what happened: I telephoned Michael Heyward, who had written the book about the Malley affair. And I asked him whether Vogelesang was still alive and he said, no, he’s dead. And I thought, well, fine, because I knew Michael had spoken to him when he was researching his book. It was, of course, sloppy of me – no journalist would have done that; but I’m a novelist. So I was in Adelaide, and this guy stands up in the back of the hall and he says: “In your book you have changed the names of all of the characters and yet you have left the name of a good decent man unchanged? Would you have done that if Detective Vogelesang was alive?” And I said, “I don’t know, probably not. It’s a good name, though.” So he said: “I am here to inform you that Johannes Something Augustus Vogelesang is alive and well in Adelaide today and he is not a happy man.” And the next day there
was a report in the *Adelaide Advertiser*: the Police Association were completely outraged.

GAILE: But then again, as a writer you are entitled to take up these things.

CAREY: Yes and no. In any case, my ‘Vogelesang’ cannot be *that* Vogelesang, because my Vogelesang is from Melbourne and everybody knows that Detective Vogelesang was an Adelaide policeman. Actually, I felt bad to have done this to an old man in his last years, but anyone who wishes to revisit the transcript of Harris’s trial would find it difficult to feel much sympathy for Vogelesang. The Australia of 1946 was darkly and deeply philistine.

GAILE: The next issue I’d like to talk about is literary prizes. Does it worry you or annoy you that *My Life as a Fake* was not shortlisted for this year’s Booker?

CAREY: Did it annoy me? No. Did it annoy me that *Jack Maggs* wasn’t there? No. You know, having won the Booker Prize twice, and having been shortlisted three times, I can speak with some authority: it is a crapshoot. There’s no justice, no right or wrong. Prizes are made by human beings with their different points of view and their politics and their vanities and their good wishes.

GAILE: And the Booker is a very political prize; it’s got a lot to do with cultural politics.

CAREY: Perhaps, but in a way that I don’t understand. Whenever I’ve been on the short-list I’ve had no doubt that I deserved to be there! [laughs]. But the truth is, if you put five people in a room, anything can happen. It’s like electing the Pope. There are compromise candidates, and cardinals with passions, and cardinals with good ideas and weak personalities. But I’ve been Pope enough. I’m well-armoured against disappointment or rage.

Although, to contradict myself as usual: I sometimes was passionately irritated by the reception of *My Life as a Fake*, particularly in Britain, where I once or twice fell into the hands of poets. Of course, if I look back over a lifetime of reviews this is the way it always is. And if you return to the Australian reviews of *Oscar and Lucinda* (which is now thought to be a huge success) you will see that many of the major reviews were derogatory. And *Illywhacker* – it’s the same: Elizabeth Webby’s assessment is a good example.

GAILE: “A great short story trapped within a fat novel,” or something to that effect.
The “contrarian streak”

CAREY: Yes, I’d hate that review to be forgotten. But when I look at *My Life as a Fake* there are one or two I’d like to preserve in the same glass case. On the one hand, there are two or three of the best reviews I’ve had in my life: Philip Hensher in the *Times*, Geordie Greig in the *Literary Review*, and then there was the very perceptive but wonderfully unquotable Tom Deveson in the *Sunday Times*. And then you have this, God save, Blake Morrison instructing me in narrative art. The unfortunate thing was that Morrison was in the *Guardian*, and the Anglophiles in the United States all read the *Guardian*, so this contaminant briefly entered the American food chain. But, of course, the review itself is a treasure and I wouldn’t want it forgotten, any more than Elizabeth Webby’s.

GAILE: To return to literary prizes: critics like Graham Huggan or Luke Strongman in their analyses of the Booker Prize have pointed out that the prize reiterates older patterns of cultural control. The argument is that the jurors are seated in London, head of the former Empire, and they decide about the quality of cultural products from places which had been under British control for centuries, in many cases. Does that worry you?

CAREY: Of course it’s disgusting that this cultural power is still exerted, but it’s only going to be important in Australia if Australia wants it to be important. So it isn’t imposed, it’s invited. And, although I’m surprised to find myself saying it, sometimes it is still necessary. When I recall the initial response to *True History of the Kelly Gang* in Australia, it seems truly pathetic. I mean, it seemed like no-one was capable of making an independent judgement. That was in the very beginning, in the first big reviews. No-one had any fucking idea – *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Melbourne Age*, *The Australian*, *Adelaide Advertiser*. Later there were more nuanced appreciations. But, God help me, here are sentences that have never existed in the language, in the Australian language, or in literature before, and the novel was reported respectfully – this was the national story – but as for understanding, they displayed none. So I feel like I needed someone from outside of the culture to at least partially see the book. So, if that’s cultural control, I have to admit I’m grateful.

GAILE: When you write your books, do you have a particular audience in mind? Do you see yourself as an international writer, or do you write primarily for an Australian audience? After all, there is so much in your writings that concerns Australians.

CAREY: Well, I’ll take contradictory positions. I’ve always said that one writes for one’s people; one writes for Australians. That still remains true,
otherwise I wouldn’t have had the chicken and lettuce sandwich and the chocolate milkshake and the “reffo fellow” in my reading today – these references make no sense to anybody outside Australia. But there are times, in writing a book like *The Kelly Gang*, that I have great benefit in being away from home. My Manhattan friends and neighbours don’t know this story, so when I think about them, my friends, it stops me taking a free ride on the material.

In those pages today – do you remember? – there was a 1975 Holden ute without air-conditioning, and my character opens the vent and the cabin suddenly fills with dust, honey blossom, the smell of rubber. I seriously doubt that’s an American thing. I think the honey comes from the blossoms of gum-trees the ute has been parked beneath. For me, the great pleasure is an Australian pleasure. I expect Australians will share that particular sense-memory, so that’s really what my buzz comes from.

**Gaile:** Considering your global readership and the importance of, for example, Americans and Britons as an audience and a market, would you go on writing in the Australian language during your residence here in New York even if it was incomprehensible to Americans and Britons?

**Carey:** Yes, I would.

**Gaile:** In your novels, Britain is in the focus of criticism again and again. The British are always on the agenda, and in most cases not favourably. And this sometimes also implies that some of your characters would also like to reject their past altogether, or even deny the British part of their Australian-ness. Do you not see this as a danger?

**Carey:** Think about *Jack Maggs*. What’s *Jack Maggs*? What does it grow out of? What is it entwined around? What is it arguing? It is arguing with one of the great works of English literature. One of the great riches that we Australians inherit is English literature. So it’s fine to quarrel with it; but it is also ours. I think *Jack Maggs* is absolute evidence of that. As for Herbert Badgery, I wanted to talk about Australian nationalism, and if you look at the book overall, it’s intensely critical of Australian nationalism – after all, the family end up being pets in their own pet shop. Badgery is always posturing as an Australian but he’s always compromised from the beginning. He sells the car that is most easily sold – that’s a very Aussie thing to do. And if you actually want to examine Herbert Badgery’s behaviour, he’s intensely pragmatic while he’s blathering and carrying on. So a lot of the book is about Australian bullshit and the fact that we have taken the most self-deceptive path – say, with the Holden (actually an Opel), which was billed as “Australia’s Own Car.”
Jack Maggs grows out of English literature; Oscar and Lucinda celebrates English nineteenth-century life, literature, history; My Life as a Fake certainly has English characters whom I loved using. Then, look at the snobbish, culturally dismissive John Slater. He’s our English nightmare, but I can use him to shine light on Australia in a way I couldn’t do with Australians.

GAILE: In a speech in 1986 you said Australian culture was still terribly thin. Do you think this is still the case?

CAREY: Yes, of course, and why shouldn’t we say so? Why would we not have cultural cringe? Why would we not be embarrassed about this? If you think, as a German, that Goethe didn’t exist and you only had 200 years to invent yourselves, you also would tend to be a little insecure. It’s not weird.

GAILE: Apropos cultural insecurity: when you drafted the character of Bob McCorkle, did you conceive him as a sort of allegorical figure representing Australia’s inauthentic culture and its unnatural birth?

CAREY: In My Life as a Fake, there are a lot of explicit concerns about Australia — say, the effect of the fake on an anxious self-doubting culture. Of course I was aware of this. But, incredible as it may seem, I had no interest in an allegory.

GAILE: Reading My Life as a Fake, I wondered why you never published any poetry. After all, the novel is about modern poetry, and in Illywhacker, for example, Herbert’s poem plays a very important part.

CAREY: You’ll never be able to find my early poetry, I promise. It was truly terrible. From 1961 on, I read a deal of poetry; the Faber Book of Modern Poetry, the Cantos come to mind, and Eliot. But I was a failure as a poet.

Today, however, I derive immense pleasure from the rhythm of sentences; and, more and more in this new book, I think I want to nail the words together in a way that poets might understand. I really want to slap the words down, break the rules in ways that are both dissonant and true. The two first-person narrators are both Australian men. And I’ve never had voices really quite like these. But all of the “fuck” and “shit” and “cunt” and “bloody” are so much the way that Australians talk. So I really love to do that, to mix this very distinctive foul-mouthed language with very high culture.

GAILE: Do you personally know people who talk like that?

CAREY: What a question! Of course. It’s so close to my own voice.
GAILE: Is it just accidental that *My Life as a Fake*, *Wrong About Japan* and the one you are currently writing are set, at least partly, in Asia?

CAREY: Oh, there’s no scheme. I wrote *Wrong About Japan* because my son and I are both interested in Japan in different ways. And yes, the two books touch each other. But the novel I am currently writing and *My Life as a Fake* connect in another respect as well. I’m rather annoyed about this connection, but I cannot stop it. You see, the new book also involves fraudulence in art, and deceit, and fakes. And so I can already hear people say: “You’ve always been interested in fakes and so on,” which is not the case, but I know I’m going to have to deal with these questions forever. Or as soon as forever begins.
Bringing Australia Home

Peter Carey, the Booker, and the Repatriation of Australian Culture

KAREN LAMB

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF PETER CAREY’S LATEST WORK, *My Life as a Fake* (2003), its author has received extraordinary media attention, particularly on his frequent visits to Australia to promote the book. In almost every public utterance, Carey has taken pains to direct attention towards his new novel and its core intrigue: that one can imagine an untruth into full being, that myth can become reality. Ironically, these imaginative preoccupations are by no means remote from the circumstances in which Carey now finds himself – an author struggling to separate his literary achievements and aims from the near-mythical figure, created in the media, of the “famous Booker Prize-winning Australian author Peter Carey.” A publicist may argue that this is a wholly positive outcome, but the publicity multiplier effect of winning the British Booker Prize for fiction is not all advantage: this most prominent award drives a process of cultural iconography that is every bit as protean and powerful as any of Carey’s fictions. Moreover, a marriage between the effects of a global, commercially driven book culture and the national speaking position Carey occupies as a celebrity-status Australian author may not boast the positive outcome for literature, or Australia, that is currently keeping the publishers and booksellers smiling – not if his main public role is as “an import–export industry for re-badged Australiana.”1

There are key moments of transformation in the public framing of authorship; moments when the publication of a novel and the cultural appropriation of its content coalesce, and Carey is at the epicentre of such a moment. Literature may once have been a “relatively unfashionable cultural domain”\(^2\) for the mass media, but cultural notoriety is now so skillfully mediated that the semantic space between ‘author’, ‘work’, ‘culture’, and ‘national identity’ narrows to produce an undifferentiated cultural message that is stronger than any of its constituent parts. Now that over four years have passed since the publication of Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) and the second Booker Prize it won for him, it is possible to observe this effect in the transformation in Carey’s public profile as a writer. It is not going too far to suggest, in shorthand, that a ‘post-Kelly-2-Booker-Carey’ phenomenon is much in evidence. A recent Australian television arts interview programme, for example, interviewed Carey and the Australian writer and former Booker winner Thomas Keneally. The cosy chat about “America, Britain and US”\(^3\) announced by the host sounded eerily natural in the aftermath of the Iraq war, with the writers cast as a ‘coalition of the winning’. They commented cheerfully enough on life in America and their personal experience of winning the British Booker Prize. According to Carey, whose expatriate status as a New Yorker was enthusiastically embraced, America was “exciting,” “less homogeneous” than Australia. He remained, on the other hand, disappointed by the lingering “nineteenth-century attitudes”\(^4\) of British people towards Australia.

The effect of the interview was far from urbane and closer to spectacle (or perhaps a real-life projection of Carey’s early short story “American Dreams”). Viewers were treated to the image of a couple of prominent Australian authors, in an americanized Australian subtropical location, speaking at a formal dinner (“Two Booker Dinner”) about a very British prize from a podium emblazoned with the name of the prestigious “Sheraton” host resort. It was an unselfconscious re-run of the ‘cringe’, that lingering habit of mind in Australia which determines that local success must be lushly daubed with the colours of international distinction. Yet the programme encapsulated so much of what has changed in the media representation of Carey and his work.

For one thing, Carey’s New York residency is now the most oft-repeated reference to him, usually appearing at the start of most media stories. This seems to have added cosmopolitan credentials to what was once predominantly a view of Carey as a “naive Australian talent”\(^5\) – leaving his Booker wins

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\(^3\) “Words” with James Griffin, *ABC Television* (20 July 2003).


\(^5\) Turner, “Nationalising the Author,” 135.
to play a different but more significant role in affirming his literary celebrity status. While the themes of Carey’s novels make the popularizing of Australian history and mythology an almost inevitable badge of his success, there currently exists an uneasy tension between the sophistication apparently conferred by his international success and the media’s tendency to depict him as an enduring symbol of Australianness (a ‘postcolonial exotic’), the product of a unique “collapsing of the individual back into the national spirit.”

At the same time, the character of this new incarnation of Carey as national icon is now inseparable from the Booker Prize and British–Australian relations, adding a new perspective to the way we view the ‘internationally successful Australian author’.

The circularity inherent in this outcome is easier to understand if one reflects for a moment on the Booker Prize itself. The prize operates as a shorthand symbol of literary elitism whose public face concerns itself with popularity and readability; an ambiguous creation which the machinery of commerce that gave rise to its existence was destined to produce. Equally ambiguous are the many claims made of the Booker, the bestowing of the prize with powerful qualities of literary divination, so that in time the award became an exercise in global literary influence emanating from Britain. It is said to have breathed life into a dying literary form (the novel), underwritten the emergence of serious literary fiction as a viable consumer product, promoted a new pluralism among novelists writing in English, and waved a wand of colonial approval over the literary achievements of authors from any number of former British colonies. Enormous financial reward, it is assumed, awaits those in the chain of book production, of whom the author is but one. Indeed, in its current form authors seem estranged figures on the fringes of a process which is assuming fantastical elements as each year passes. The award is now the subject of a cascading set of media fascinations: Booker book, Booker author, Booker odds, Booker fever. These travel the length of the award process and magnify the sense of a culture of chance in which winning and achievement are spectacle. In such an atmosphere, it is not very surprising to learn that success or failure inspires “an intense patriotic gratification” that makes the prize “akin to a victory in international sport.”

One could argue that, in so being, the Booker is a successful marriage of cause and effect that has met the original aims of the prize: to select the “best novel of the year” and to promote and popularize literary fiction to a com-

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6 Turner, “Nationalising the Author,” 138.
mercial level befitting its genre cousins. The prize has had an undeniable influence – though ‘impact’ might be a better word. The Booker, for example, is credited with having transformed the reading of literary fiction from the pastime of an interested elite into an activity enjoyed by millions of informed readers. In the rush to identify this progressive cultural shift, it is sometimes forgotten that the satisfaction of these new literary fiction devotees drives the financial imperatives of the very few large corporations who form the current book trade. The Booker has certainly met its industry-related commercial obligations, but in a broader cultural sense it would be more useful to see the award as “part achievement, and part myth” – not the most valuable literary prize financially – but with an influence beyond its commercial basis.

At the same time, easy assumptions about the Booker (including its financial bounty) are best kept in check: a win by a well-known author is not a licence to print money, any more than an unusual work by a virtual unknown is a financial disaster. In his analysis of the Booker, Richard Todd relates how, in the early days of the award, some publishers were caught off-guard by their reticence to reprint a Booker-winning title – even in the face of reader demand – or how a mass-selling Booker novel might not necessarily inject new vitality into the commercial prospects of the author’s back-listed earlier titles. The experience of Peter Carey’s Australian publishers supports this view:

The effect of the Booker tends to be specific to the winning novel – The Tax Inspector and The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith were not so warmly received, especially by readers, and their sales suffered accordingly. However, Peter’s overall profile has been greatly enhanced by first one and then two Bookers. It means that when he has a good book, like Maggs [sic], it benefits. When he has a great book like True History of the Kelly Gang the result is astronomical sales (for literary fiction anyway).

Booker anecdotes such as these are not simply about risking capital in a cultural domain. What becomes clear is that the content, style and themes of Booker-winning novels are by no means exempt from commercial prerogatives and that, to some degree, commerce can now be said to drive the canon. A fascinating account of this process in action is Todd’s close study of A.S. Byatt’s Booker-winning Possession on its post-Booker pathways across the...

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10 Craig Munro (publisher, University of Queensland Press), correspondence, 12 August, 2003.
globe. He cites the critical manoeuvres of reviewers as they strained to reproduce evidence in keeping with the Booker judges’ reading of the novel as a reincarnation of “every narrative device of English fiction.” All of this, apparently, was undertaken in an effort to engage a large but hitherto uninterested American readership. It therefore seems naive to equate the ‘myth’ of the Booker with the various personality scuffles and scandals of Booker events and publicity. The rise of the Booker’s public profile and influence is much better understood from a sociopolitical viewpoint, one that identifies the coalescence of factors in the commerce and culture of 1980s publishing and inserts the Booker into that narrative – as a provocative agent rather than a substantial cause.

Situating the Booker within an ambient sociopolitical climate implies a link with its history, one that forces us to see the award as the representative product of a certain set of British literary and cultural values, the tentacles of which reach well into the present. The much-approved transition in the character of Booker choices, from the archaic and predictable to decisions representing a new pluralism, can be similarly scrutinized. Careful study of winning novels over the prize’s history does not especially support claims of adventurousness. The conviction that the Booker shifted from a position representing a closed imperialist view of the ‘British novel’ towards an accommodation of the ‘novel in English’ has some foundation, but one should question how liberating the effect of this has been for authors. As Graham Huggan observed, “there is still a residual conservatism playing about the Booker’s edges – conservatism brought out in approaches to the prize-winning novels’ themes.” Is the current Booker becoming just as predictable and reductive in its influence on literary fiction, expressed through its verdicts, as it was in its infancy? If so, one can understand the growing concern that “the late twentieth-century prize and media consumer culture does not differ substantially from aristocratic patronage in the age of Shakespeare.”

These doubting undercurrents in Booker mythology should make us question whether what the Booker purports to value and what it actually values is the same thing. In particular, the contemporary view of the prize as an ‘internationalizing’ influence on literary fiction takes us to the ambiguity at the heart of the award – to the world of book commerce, where literature is destined to become confused with concepts of national identity. If it pays….

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11 Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions*, 42. Todd’s discussion makes frequent use of this particular quotation from a review of *Possession* by Jay Parini.
12 See, for example, Todd, *Consuming Fictions*.
13 Huggan, “Prizing Otherness,” 111.
14 Todd, *Consuming Fictions*, 10.
Booker is said to have had initiated, for example, what is referred to as a “postcolonial literary era” – with Salman Rushdie’s Booker win for *Midnight’s Children* (1981) seen as the “catalyzing force.” As Todd writes,

> Where the novel in English was formerly simply British and American in the public view, Booker-eligibility has gradually enabled the literary energy that was once at the former Empire’s centre and directed outwards to the colonial periphery, by a process of post-colonial transference to be directed back at the enfeebled centre.\(^\text{16}\)

In fact, at the time, the succession of Booker wins by postcolonial writers met with some resentment,\(^\text{17}\) yet Todd’s view of postcolonial Booker empowerment remains curiously optimistic. He glosses over the disenfranchisement of authors from the mechanisms that determine how their work will be marketed and read and the unfortunate cultural appropriations this produces. It is too often a process in which a fetishized version of the exotic is naturalized to fit comfortably within a British–global consciousness of the postcolonial, where the works of writers are actively “pressed into the service of manufacturing cultural Otherness.”\(^\text{18}\) Associations hybridize to such an extent that, for example, Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger* (1987) could be represented both as a popular romanticized Empire story – with spice – and as “seen to possess many of the epic qualities of serious literary fiction”\(^\text{19}\) considered necessary for a Booker win.

It is well worth considering the literary-historical context that informs the award when considering the progress of the Booker’s apparent engagement with postcolonial writing. Malcolm Bradbury offers some clues in the revised edition of his *Modern British Novel*. While it is not surprising to see a prominent British novelist, critic and former Booker judge noting the importance of the Booker for any serious study of the British novel, Bradbury is more revealing on the oblique level of his analysis. One senses at intervals some of the underlying literary and cultural assumptions that must always have informed Booker decisions; prevailing English attitudes and prejudices that cannot be extinguished, precisely because they are embedded in the natural dis-

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\(^\text{16}\) Todd, *Consuming Fictions*, 77.


\(^\text{19}\) Todd, *Consuming Fictions*, 81.
It is difficult to ignore the silent but insistent ‘we’ underlying this description: ‘we the British’, ‘we the Allies’, ‘we the Commonwealth’. Other telltale signatures creep into the language of literary analysis. Bradbury talks of a “literary art” that must keep busy at “its familiar work of exploring the world as in general we see it, and the way we live it now.” Literature is thus chiefly mimetic, while ‘great’ novels are founded on the epic, mythic and heroic. We begin to see – in Booker terms – what might be meant by ‘history’ or ‘fictional experiment’, not to mention ‘postcolonial’. Where Richard Todd problematized the manufactured debate about ‘English narrative’ in his discussion of the reviewing reception of Byatt’s Possession, Bradbury sees the novel as “built between Victorian romance and artistry and the contemporary world of feminist deconstructive thought.” Thus he betrays a genuine nostalgia for older forms of the ‘English’ novel, at the same time as he appropriates “contemporary feminist deconstructive thought” as something akin to a modern life-style choice. Bradbury concludes with the prescription that the Booker novelist’s job is that of “making the past relevant to the present and making history, past and present, the material of literary experimentation.” ‘Contemporary’ fiction is applauded for cloaking these ‘essentials’ in the colourful literary fashions of the day, be it postmodernism or magical realism. History as literary experimentation is less politically unnerving, one suspects.

History, and how the Booker judges like their history, is therefore a matter of some importance when it comes to the Booker and postcolonial writers – Peter Carey among them. ‘History’ is acknowledged as the strong preferred theme in Booker terms, as Huggan notes:

[...] a gauge of the Booker’s postcolonial leanings, is revisionist history. More than half of the prizewinning novels to date investigate aspects of primarily colonial history or present a counter-memory to the official historical record.21

One can’t help wondering how revisionist such histories are, or whether it is more likely the case that they appeal to Booker-preferred notions of ‘mythic’ and ‘epic’ and ‘experimental’ – the Bradbury formula. Carey’s novels, as

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20 Bradbury, Preface to The Modern British Novel, ix (all quotations this page).
21 Huggan, Postcolonial Exotic, 111.
much as any of the postcolonial winning novels, invite that question most emphatically. Three of them have caught the attention of Booker judges: *Illywhacker* (1985) was short-listed, while *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *True History of the Kelly Gang* both won.\(^2\) What kind of Australian history is Carey imagining and mythologizing in these novels? What historical truth-value does the Booker and its media-freight confer on the cultural and historical content of each novel? Which “semiotic markers”\(^2^3\) of Australianness have been privileged in this process?

*Illywhacker*, as I remarked in an earlier study of Carey’s celebrity, is a “rumbustious anthem of dinkum picaresque,”\(^2^4\) ideally suited, on the face of it, to the task of updating a popular view of Australia as an ocker kingdom of adventurous tall-tale tellers. If it was quickly anointed as a ‘Great Australian Novel’, this was precisely because it narrated Australian history in the national idiom: casual, irreverent, impudent. It is ironic from this perspective to consider that *Illywhacker*’s postcolonial branding has depended to a large extent on conventional British notions of ‘mythic’ and ‘epic’ that drive Booker preferences – *not* on revisionist history. In English reviews a cultural comfort-zone was well mapped-out, with comparisons to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* appearing frequently. Australian reviewers were also pre-occupied with the official record of history, seeing the 139-year-old ‘unreliable narrator’ of Carey’s novel as the perfect mouthpiece for a “new moment in the cycle of Australian folk history.”\(^2^5\) Carey was writing ‘bush Gothic’ in a way that returned Australia to the past glories of the bush tale, to a version of itself – one that was also a cultural projection.

It appears that postmodernism is no ally in the arena of national history and identity re-formation. The carnivalesque aspect of Carey’s novel was interpreted as no more than a metaphor for the exotic and untamed nature of an undiscovered land – retrospective evidence of the need for the civilizing colonial mission. In *Illywhacker*, Carey managed to exhume a colonial past, tinkering with some caricatures of Australianness, but he recast his story in such a fantastical mode that his novel simultaneously accommodated clichéd English projections of what constitutes Australian ‘history’ or Australian ‘character’. Had *Illywhacker* actually won the Booker in 1985 it would, in fact, have pointed to an innate conservatism – confirming the prize as “re-

\(^2^2\) *Oscar and Lucinda* won the Booker in 1988; *True History of the Kelly Gang* won the Booker in 2001.

\(^2^3\) Huggan, “Postcolonial Exotic,” 27.


\(^2^5\) Lamb, *Peter Carey*, 33.
mainly bound to an Anglocentric discourse of benevolent paternalism.”

The controversy over the Maori writer Keri Hulme’s win for *The Bone People* in that year, with the suggestion that it was a ‘compromise choice’, only serves to confirm the suspicion that somehow Carey – writing white, predominantly male Australian history – would have been *less* of a compromise.

In the light of this, Carey’s first Booker win for *Oscar and Lucinda* seems almost inevitable. No doubt publication in the same year as Australia’s bicentennial celebrations helped, and British critics wasted no time in assuming that Carey’s first Booker had rescued him from literary nonentity in his homeland. Once again, he produced a book with enormous narrative scope, another ‘epic’, which was also seen as a tribute to the British novel. *Oscar and Lucinda* was described as “historically and generically Victorian” in its literary style and conventions, and dutifully compared with the novels of Dickens, a fact which its linear narrative, detailed characterization and improbable plot virtually guaranteed. A sizable section of the novel was set in England, which may have helped strengthen that connection. There was nothing to stand in the way of an unproblematic reading of the novel as created in the spirit of pioneer fiction. The glorious tragic failure of crazed frontier entrepreneurship in *Oscar and Lucinda* was interpreted as an imaginative re-creation of the plucky spirit of white colonial settlers, testimony to the energy and enterprise of colonization. It is difficult to imagine how Carey was to rescue himself – even if he so desired – from the magnetic force of an increasingly imperialist appropriation of his work.

Perhaps he tried with his two subsequent novels, *The Tax Inspector* (1991) and *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994). In these, Carey does engage with issues of a contemporary Australia, such as corporate corruption and the deeper meaning of possessing a colonized sense of identity (albeit employing the conceits and fantasies we have come to expect in his work). Yet these novels achieved nothing like the success of their predecessors, in literary or commercial terms. Carey then headed back into the familiar territory of the Australian convict past with *Jack Maggs* (1997), but his relation to discourses of Australianness has now changed forever because of his decision to write about Ned Kelly, one of the most recognizable icons of Australia’s colonial past, in *True History of the Kelly Gang*.

The current status of Carey’s celebrity has a durability that owes much to the sheer scale of Ned Kelly mythology. If anyone doubts the power of the myth Carey chose, consider the writers, filmmakers and musicians who have been inspired by the outlaw legend: an 1879 book on the Kelly Gang; a

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26 Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, 11

popular radio play in 1942; a ballet in the 1950s; films (including the recent Gregor Jordon release); an appearance in the 2000 Olympics ceremony; regular specialist exhibitions at national galleries and museums; a string quartet interpretation of Carey’s own novel; and, most visibly from an international perspective, the remarkable semi-abstract paintings of the Australian artist Sidney Nolan. Carey’s entirely sympathetic account of a young colonial man driven to crime must take its own place alongside the other exemplars of Ned Kelly as cultural phenomenon. Carey’s public role as an author is now dominated by a cultural presence more powerful than his own, to which can be added a third cultural phenomenon – the Booker. In terms of representations of Australian history and culture, this is an explosive triad.

Why does it matter that Carey embellishes and develops an existing mythology in the creation of *True History of the Kelly Gang*? History as popular entertainment is hardly a form for which he alone is responsible. The problem – once again – is what kind of history, because historical fictions that “ostensibly [debunk] imperial glories” can also propagate “commercially profitable imperial myths.” The consequence is that there is real difficulty now in continuing to view Carey as any kind of ‘historical novelist’ (revisionist or otherwise) concerned with the “cruelties of colonialism,” because this view enables a re-inscription of colonial experience as an exoticized version of white suffering, a new and far more worrying postcolonial ‘exotic’. Images of anti-authoritarianism and the ‘larrikin’ Aussie spirit are revived as essential ingredients of a white Australian colonial heroism, offering little to a contemporary readership concerned to move beyond the clichés of received history and into the less attractive arena of Aboriginal dispossession and suffering. This amounts to a double miscarriage of history, played out in the cultural territory of media attention devoted to *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Reviews of the novel play their part, and have variously summarized the plot of this “bushranger hero” novel and his story of “searing prejudice and deprivation” as just another step in the narrative of British oppression of the settler Irish poor. Carey’s Ned strides through a broader national narrative of colonial adventure and risk-taking, with the novel being dubbed a riveting colonial “adventure story,” a “Western,” a cross between “Arthurian romance,

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Science Fiction and Western.” References to Huckleberry Finn, Cormac McCarthy, and Jesse James were not uncommon, either. The doubtful benefits – for Carey and Australia – of his name now possessing both national and international iconic status thanks to such associations can be heard in the confused descriptors of him as a “postmodern excavator of national myths” or as the “Antipodean Carey,” but also as the “Aussie from New York” who, it seems, must remain a colonial curiosity – since he originates from “the wonderfully named town of Bacchus Marsh.”

Carey, of course, does not enjoy total control of the cultural appropriation of his work; at the same time, it would be naive to suggest that he is unaware of these developing attitudes towards him or insensitive to their implications. Consciously or unconsciously, in the past he has proved himself more than capable of engaging with the process that helps produce and promote his books. Not only do Carey’s extra-fictional utterances play a part in the shaping of his public persona; it is also possible to see some of his fictional manoeuvres as an attempt to maintain a speaking position outside of, but in relation to, the reception of his novels. The Aboriginal references in 30 Days in Sydney (2001), for example, have been read in such a way; a subtle mitigation from an author who in the main continues to serve up the white-Australian narratives of Australian history. As two-time winner of the Booker, Carey has fallen prey to the “conflicted relationship between the oppositional politics of postcolonialism and the assimilative machinery of the ‘global’ prize” – and he appears to know it. The question is, whether the effect of the recent years of the Booker has so commodified literature, ideas and national cultures on a global scale that all writers who enter are obliged to respond and create within a complicit atmosphere. Richard Todd suggested as much when he posed the question, “How many of even the most interesting postcolonial writers of recent years are […] however subconsciously, with

40 Huggan, Postcolonial Exotic, 118.
whatever desire to say something new – now responding both aesthetically and commercially to the 1980s as ‘the Rushdie decade’? Similarly, we might ask: how conscious is Peter Carey of pleasing a readership primed on British-Booker preferences for ‘history’, ‘epic’ and ‘myth’?

Suddenly, postcolonialism seems a long way from Carey’s fiction, or from the aims and effects of the Booker. What was once an inherently conservative award designed to reward literary achievement, producing fashionable and predictable winners (usually well-known older British novelists), seems to have come full circle. As the Booker Prize increases its global profile and influence on writing and publishing, there seems more than a whiff of the canon attached to its big-name, publicly recognized postcolonial winners. The Booker judges (and ultimately a global readership) are clearly getting exactly the kind of Australian history they feel comfortable with, and Carey is the good colonial son who has brought it home to them. His fictions do not offer much that is not easily accommodated within a British perception of imperialist history and populist ideas about the citizens of ‘down under’. Australians are seen as people who have risen to the challenges of colonial life set for them; whose approval of their cultural heritage is such that they do not wish to become a republic; whose Prime Minister, hitherto an unknown figure in the British media, became visible as the third member of the ‘coalition of the willing’ which brought America, Britain and Australia together in the ‘liberation’ of Iraq. One wonders exactly what kind of patronage an Australian winning the Booker now represents.

Perhaps these developments are the inevitable working-out of a public award process which was always going to lean towards conservatism. Yet it is no longer sufficient to think only of the process, that familiar linking of participants in a chain of agency: publishers, agents, authors, booksellers. Booker winners are conscripted into a broader process of nationalization and internationalization, whether or not their novels engage overtly with history and cultural myth. In choosing to write a novel about Ned Kelly, however, Carey is not so much a conscript as an energetic volunteer. Heroes – as he well knows – are made or unmade in the public imagination, and the ‘post-Kelly-2-Booker-Carey’ is now close to becoming one, at least in the Australian media. This is not as appealing as it sounds, for an author or for readers. As Graeme Turner once lamented, “The prospect of a succession of national heroes writing their fiction for an audience whose conservative expectations are easily satisfied but rarely extended is not an attractive one.”

41 Todd, *Consuming Fictions*, 128.
42 Turner, “Nationalising the Author,” 138.
The consequence of Carey’s second Booker Prize is that it has put Australian history and mythology back into the possession of the ‘home country’ – repatriated in a political climate whereby the cosiest relations for some time currently exist between Australia and Britain, while the agenda of true ‘revisionist history’ and reconciliation with Australia’s original inhabitants is all but stalled.

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PART II:
ASPECTS AND OVERVIEWS
Towards an Alphabet of Australian Culture

Peter Carey’s Mythistorical Novels

ANDREAS GAILE

Instead of the historical – mythmaking power

In a speech held at the Salzburg Festival in 1994, the cultural critic George Steiner expounded on the near-impossibility of creating a new myth, a new grand récit for Europe. He asked: “what myth would be correspondent to our present condition; what new myth could hold up a living mirror to our European being?” Steiner at the time advocated the quest for a new myth in the face of “post-modern gurus [who] tell us that the time of the great stories is over. That we can no longer tell, let alone invent, such stories.” Although a new foundational story for Europe would have to “face its recent past, and the unbearably European responsibilities in that past,” Steiner warned that, without it, the Old World would never “in any inward, authentic sense recover or flourish.”

While the bestialities of the Holocaust and the general sense of “too much history” continue to haunt Europe, New-World societies are liberated from the Old World’s all-eclipsing past. The former settler colonies in particular

2 An excerpt from this speech was published as “Modernity, Mythology and Magic,” Guardian (London; 6 August 1994), Features: 27.
3 Steiner, “Modernity, Mythology and Magic,” 27.
have proved to be breeding grounds for new myth. Peter Carey, like George Steiner, has made a case for myth and mythmaking throughout his writerly career. In a speech held in 1986, he recounted how he had come across a busload of singing pensioners at a motel in the Ballinger Valley and witnessed how they quickly ran out of songs to celebrate themselves. Prompted by the group’s thwarted attempts at merrymaking, Carey felt more clearly than ever that non-Aboriginal Australian “culture (our popular culture, our high culture, our culture as a whole) was still terribly thin.” And he went on:

A culture is something that is built up over time – a layering, an accretion of songs, stories, myths, memories that give meaning to the present. And when we want to celebrate being Australian, we do not have a great many of these reference points. […] We still do not have enough songs to sustain us in the difficult times ahead.

Eighteen years and eight full-scale novels later, I want to argue that, taken together, Carey’s fictions form a narrative ensemble which adds to what Steiner calls the “alphabet of […] culture.” This system of narratively loaded cultural signs – made up, according to Steiner, of a culture’s stories, legends, myths, sagas – provides nourishment and orientation for the patchwork of transplanted cultures down under. Given the time to grow and mature, this alphabet might help to substantiate Australian culture and make it seem less provisional.

Myth, the Alpha of this cultural alphabet, occurs in various semantic manifestations in Carey’s works. In the following, I will first provide an overview of the use of myth in the novels. I shall then examine Bliss (1981), True History of the Kelly Gang (2000), and My Life as a Fake (2003) to illustrate how mythmaking operates in the fictional reality of Carey’s novels. While the last two both re-imagine mythic figures of Australia’s past, Bliss – a story about storytelling – examines the mechanisms and functioning of mythmaking in Australia on a more general level. All three fictions, to be sure, grant us a privileged view of mythogenesis in Australia.

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4 For an exemplification of mythmaking in the new world, see, for example, Marie Vautier’s New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s UP, 1998).
6 Steiner, “Modernity, Mythology and Magic,” 27.
A Word on Myth

Although postmodernity is, on the one hand, characterized by the dismissal of grand narratives and a retreat from certain myths, it paradoxically witnesses, on the other, a renaissance of myth. The tradition of mythmaking today is carried on in fields as diverse as political propaganda, advertising, and historiography. Since myth as a narrative structure is highly malleable, every interest- or pressure-group can construct its own myth. As Roland Barthes explains,

> everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones.\(^7\)

The myths that Barthes famously subjected to structuralist analysis in *Mythologies* (1957) are precisely of this modern sort, taken, for example, from sport, home-making, or advertising. Hence, in mythogenesis it is not the subject-matter but the “social usage”\(^8\) that is important. A story’s cultural currency determines whether it attains mythic status in contemporary popular consciousness, or whether it remains ephemeral, of no lasting consequence.

At a time when cultural products are ensured huge circulation through the Internet and global marketing strategies, stories are very prone to become myths; the alleged mythlessness in postmodernity must therefore itself be regarded as a myth. The much-debated question of whether *new* myth can arise at all these days has to be answered in the affirmative, although, of course, today’s myths are hardly ever truly foundational stories of the kind that have been handed down from the early days of human civilization; and, given the ephemeral nature of any form of knowledge today, postmodern myths are not likely to become transhistorical master-narratives, either. Myth’s trajectory has clearly run from the sacred to the profane; its religious and ritual origins are becoming increasingly secularized. Hence, rather than explaining some fundamental ingredient of human existence crucial to an understanding of the world, myth more often than not turns out to be a targeted tool in marketing and image-making, or, more generally, a constituent of an ideology. As part of the latter, it typically either endorses some grand idea or helps to obscure some inconsistency in a world-view.

It is crucial to our understanding of myth that, whatever the circumstances of its employment, it is vital to human beings. Historians, scholars of myth and, more broadly, philosophers of culture have made it clear that myth has

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accompanied man throughout the history of civilization. The need for myth-making and storytelling even appears as one of the *differentia specifica* of the human race. Graham Swift, in a much-quoted passage from his novel *Waterland*, puts it in a nutshell: “But man […] is the story-telling animal.”

He goes on:

> Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right.10

With respect to the Australian context, the mythlessness of their new surroundings (or their failure to understand the resident myths) must have weighed greatly on the minds of the first non-Aboriginal settlers. Without a metaphysical instrumentarium to help them acquaint themselves with the land on its own terms, to internalize it through narrative, the settlers must have found it exceedingly difficult to construct a sense of belonging. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of modernity’s most ardent critics of a demythologized world, memorably describes myth’s soothing effect on the individual and the sense of togetherness and shared identity it can inspire in a whole nation:

> without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement […]. The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young soul grows to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles. Even the state knows no more powerful unwritten laws than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with religion and its growth from mythical notions.11

In his use of myth, Carey (like other postmodern storytellers and mythmakers) owes some of his premisses – wittingly or not – to this important late-nineteenth-century defence of myth. To some of Carey’s culturally dissatisfied characters myth, as will be seen, serves as wholesome metaphysical nourishment: the mythic pretexts in which the stories of their lives are anchored have the potential to quench the consuming desire of these uprooted and transplanted characters to orient themselves.

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Manifestations of Myth in Carey’s Novels

In the critical reception of his writings, myth is one of the most frequently mentioned concepts, perhaps next to the ‘postist’ discourses, his flights of fancy (variously dubbed ‘fantasy’ or ‘magical realism’ or ‘fabulation’), and his predilection for narrative trickery and showmanship. There is, in fact, hardly an essay or review article on Carey that fails to mention the word ‘myth’ or one of its lexical relatives. In the present collection, although it was not given out as a topic, myth appears in fourteen out of twenty essays.

Where myth is mentioned in reviews and critical essays, it occurs in considerable semantic variety. The mechanisms of its usage are as nebulous as the matter it designates. Especially in reviews, ‘myth’ is dropped rather casually, most often as what the myth-scholar Elizabeth Baeten lists as the most common usage of the term in ordinary public discourse: “a near synonym for ‘mistaken belief’ or, perhaps, ‘widely or deeply held beliefs with no solid foundation in the facts of the matter’.”

It also crops up as a designation for something mysterious, a person or thing that exists only in the imagination and whose actuality is not verifiable. In the present context of myth and myth-making in Carey’s novels, myth is most relevant in the sense underlying many of Northrop Frye’s writings on the topic: “to me myth always means, first and primarily, mythos, story, plot, narrative.”

But myth is also pertinent to a discussion of Carey’s writings because of its intricate relationship with history. History, the positivist discourse, gets melted down into myth through a number of narratorial manoeuvres. Sometimes Carey has his narrators rewrite history, sometimes they dissect its falsehoods; sometimes they delicense history by turning it into an explicit fiction, and sometimes they transport it to the realm of fantasy. In effect, history is refashioned into myth, a narrative without any epistemological privileges, one whose veracity can never be ascertained. Vice versa, myth is also turned into history. Sometimes Carey’s stories are decked out with all the trappings of a traditional history, such as a critical instrumentarium with footnotes and a glossary (The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith), editorial comments on the quality of the manuscripts which the account is based on (True History), or real historical persons and events that are inextricably woven into the texture of his fictions so that one wonders where the storytelling starts and where the experiential past begins (eg, in Oscar and Lucinda). The approximation of myth

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to history is a common feature of postmodern fiction; it is also indicative of a family relationship with recent (ie twentieth-century) historiographic trends such as the history of mentalities (l’histoire des mentalités) or the history of everyday life (la vie quotidienne). But even more significant than these French schools, which cut traditional historiography down to a more human size, is an historiographic concept that considers myth and history as complementary ingredients of historical discourse, hence tellingly calling itself ‘mythistory’.\(^\text{14}\) In its attempt at a rehabilitation of myth vis-à-vis the ‘scientific’ claims of traditional historiography, mythistory, significantly, has implemented for the history profession one of the basic tenets of poststructuralist thought: rather than trying to fossick through the archives for historical truth, mythistorians lay emphasis on meaning and signification. Joseph Mali demands of the history profession a ‘mythic turn’; such modern historiography, he argues,

must deal not only with what actually happened (that is, in common terms, history), nor with what people merely imagine to have actually happened (myth), but rather with the process in which both affect the production and reproduction of historical meaning (mythistory).\(^\text{15}\)

Mythistory sees history as just another signifying system, the historical agents as suspended in webs of significance, and their witnesses’ consciousnesses as meaning-making agencies. Also, and more importantly in the present context, mythistorians lay great emphasis on the historical agents’ mental saturation with myth. They thus “consider the narratives and other symbolic interpretations of historical reality in which the people believe to be as real as the

\(^{14}\) The phenomenon of mythistory has a continued tradition from Herodotus through Machiavelli to Scott, Burckhardt, Michelet and Kantorowicz, as the renowned historian Joseph Mali explains in his monograph *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003): 3. As a critical concept in the philosophy of history it is less prominent. In contemporary historiography, the two most important sources are William McNeill, who introduced the concept into modern historiography in his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1985, and Mali, who in 2003 presented his substantial monograph on the topic. Unlike Mali, for whom mythistory signifies the marriage of mythos (as story) and history, McNeill hinges his idea of mythistory on the criterion of truth: “Eternal and universal Truth about human behavior is an unattainable goal, however delectable as an ideal. Truths are what historians achieve when they bend their minds as critically and carefully as they can […] The result might best be called mythistory […] for the same words that constitute truth for some are, and always will be, myths for others”; “Mythistory, Or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” *American Historical Review* 91.1 (1986): 8–9.

\(^{15}\) Mali, *Mythistory*, 27.
conditions and events in which they actually live.”\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, Mali argues, the myths that are imagined, revived or transmitted also serve to explain the motives and stimuli that animated people’s actions in the past. For myths not only made sense of the world, thus alleviating the subject’s anguish, but their narrative patterns also served when moral guidance was sought or, in a quite practical sense, as guidelines in decision-making processes. Therefore, “In order to explain historical events, it is [...] imperative to grasp those ultimate narratives of the agents performing them, their myths.”\textsuperscript{17}

Peter Carey’s novels, I would argue, constitute a mythistory of Australia. The author seeks to analyse in his fictions the power of such “ultimate narratives” over his characters, but he also takes up myths that intrigue his real-life compatriots. His engagement with myth, though, appears highly ambivalent: Carey demythologizes as keenly as he remythologizes. Thus, paradoxically, he is mythopoet and mythoclast at the same time.

Demythologizing Australia: Misconceptions of Australianness

Myth is all-pervasive in Peter Carey’s novels. In its conventional meaning of ‘something that is not quite true’ it relates to Carey’s fictions with their often revisionist agendas as a term denoting a ‘lie’, a ‘legend’, a ‘misconception’, which – once it has been identified – calls for a rewriting and conceptual re-thinking. Given the political moorings of Carey, the leftist Republican, the avowed reconciliationist, the postcolonial novelist, it is hardly surprising that there are many myths of the Australian past and present that have engaged his writerly attention. To investigate myth, widely held misapprehensions (which at best are merely quaint and at worst highly dangerous) about the country’s culture or history can even be called one of Carey’s specialities; it is, after all, Herbert Badgery’s “speciality” to enlarge upon “The role of lies in popular perceptions of the Australian political fabric.”\textsuperscript{18} It is in this vein that in a novel like \textit{Oscar and Lucinda} the history of inland exploration is rewritten. Carey here corrects the myth of exploration as a heroic tale of bravery and recasts it as a woeful tragedy that does not fail to mention the systematic destruction of an ancient culture incompatible with the civilizing programme of the white intruders. Likewise, in \textit{Tristan Smith}, the allegory on the unequal partnership between Australia and the USA (which feature in the novel only

\textsuperscript{16} Mali, \textit{Mythistory}, 27.
\textsuperscript{17} Mali, \textit{Mythistory}, 23.
\textsuperscript{18} Peter Carey, \textit{Illywhacker} (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 1985): 488. Further page references are in the main text.
barely disguised as Efica and Voorstand) helps Carey to demolish the myth of Australia’s cultural self-reliance and political autonomy.

The writer and his fictional characters are not alone in wanting to debunk certain myths; a revisionist thrust is, in fact, characteristic of much contemporary writing about Australian cultural history, be it literary or scholarly. Carey may well be ranked among the “number of recent Australian intellectual and cultural historians” who, as Clunies Ross has it, “share what might be termed a ‘demythologising’ programme’.”19 Demythology of this sort has as its aim no vague concept of myth, but is associated with Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), the upshot of which – the image of the typical Australian – is often referred to in Australian cultural discourse simply as ‘the myth’ or ‘the legend’.20 *Illywhacker*, in particular, is devoted to sabotaging stereotypical images of Australianness as male, proud and freedom-loving. In this novel, the Australian types of ‘the myth’ are exposed not only as unrepresentative but also as being, more often than not, commercialized fictions of a pretentious and self-righteous nation at a loss for postcolonial orientation.

At the very end of the novel, Australians of the legend are climactically displayed as oddities in the showcases of the “Best Pet Shop in the World”: the “shearers [with their] dry, laconic anti-authoritarian wit” as well as the “lifesavers, inventors, manufacturers, bushmen, aboriginals” (599).

According to Clunies Ross, this strategy of debunking the myth of the legendary Australian has led demythologizers with their revisionist outlook to dwell in particular on “the role of women in Australia” and “the fate of its Aboriginal inhabitants”21 – tellingly, two of the ever-recurring concerns in Carey’s novels. Hordes of ‘real Matildas’22 people his fictions and, by entering male domains (Lucinda as factory owner) or by usurping male prerogatives such as mateship (Leah Goldstein sitting by a camp-fire in the bush, 301–303), being promiscuous (303, 308) and being very “partial” to alcohol (303), they help to undermine gender roles. The traditional image of Australian women is further destabilized by the writer’s strategy of swapping over the determinants of the sexes, thus in effect blurring gender distinctions: Herbert Badgery, for instance, turns androgynous at the ripe old age of 139 years; Oscar Hopkins, in his effeminacy, fails to share the prevailing orthodoxy of masculinity in nineteenth-century Australia; Ned Kelly’s father ritually cross-

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dresses; and many others could be mentioned here. With respect to the fate of
the Aborigines, Carey has dedicated much of *Illywhacker*'s and *Oscar and
Lucinda*'s revisionist thrust to the righting of the historical wrongs done to
the Aborigines; his engagement with the natives’ practice of firestick farming
in his recent *30 Days in Sydney* attests to his ongoing interest in this question.

Re-Mythologizing Australia:
The Cases of Kelly and Malley

Ned Kelly and Ern Malley exemplify the paradoxical nature of Carey’s policy
on myth. While the former has been used again and again in constructions of
identity and selfhood, the latter stands for one of the most memorable and
grotesque episodes in the intellectual history of the country. Both are quint-
esentially Australian – home-grown, so to speak – and both sum up a signifi-
cant part of the Australian experience. And both, albeit for different reasons,
have acquired the status of myth in Australian culture.

To begin with the former: the Kelly story demonstrates mythogenesis par
excellence. It has been told so often, and in so many popular and scholarly
forms, that its historical origins are by now hidden under a thick layer of
narrative which obscures what is historically verifiable. But the historical
facts are not what is actually important about Kelly. The outlaw is important
because he has been meaningful for Australians: they could or still can relate
their own experience to Kelly’s spirit of anti-authoritarianism; his plight is
mirrored in their own attempts at getting rid of any sort of control from out-
side. But Kelly could only be elevated to the rank of a national icon through
the myriad narratives spun around his exploits. Thus lodged in Australians’
minds, Kelly could develop into a full-blown myth.

In the assessment of mythmaking in *True History*, it is important to notice
that it works within and beyond the novel. In extratextual reality, Carey’s
novel offers a new and potent version of the Kelly myth, which has already

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23 See *30 Days*, 40–41. In his many publications on Australia’s ecological history,
the biologist Timothy Flannery elaborates on the Aborigines’ traditional fire-management
practices, which cultivated and preserved the land and thus proved the doctrine of
terra nullius an outright lie. See, for example, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological His-
tory of the Australasian Lands and People* (New York: George Braziller, 1995) and

24 Kelly, for example, emblematically featured in the opening ceremony of the
Sydney Olympics, where Australia presented itself to the world.

25 For a more detailed analysis of the way Carey entwines his *True History of the
Kelly Gang* around the facts of the Kelly Outbreak, see my “Re-Mythologizing an
Australian Legend: Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*,” *Antipodes* 15.1
monopolized popular perceptions of Kelly to a considerable degree. After all, the novel was an international bestseller and Booker winner, and was chosen for the “One Book, One Brisbane” campaign in 2002. Within the confines of the book, the mythmaking results in the fictional re-creation of Kelly’s life. It not only reflects on the Kelly myth and its social function for Australians – “What is it about we Australians [...] What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might we not find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves?” (350) – but it also offers an inquiry into the potency of myths which are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Anglo-Saxon world and which serve Kelly as narrative patterns to accommodate the story of his own life. Kelly scavenges about for English and Irish folk narratives – for example, Shakespeare’s Henry V and Richard Blackmore’s Lorna Doone – and with their help creates for himself the context of heroism. His engagement with King Henry’s “Crispin’s Day Speech” from Shakespeare’s history play demonstrates this. With the hubris of a megalomaniac, Kelly translates the epic heroism of the soldiers preparing to fight at Agincourt to his own situation. His narrative even suggests that King Henry serves him as a model. Just as the monarch’s soldiers are all gathered around him on the eve of the battle, Kelly’s army, “boys [...] noble of true Australian coin” (340), assemble around their leader. The irony of the fact that the play he uses chronicles one of the most brilliant victories of the English army seems to escape him entirely. Blackmore’s nineteenth-century classic is used in a similar manner. The Australian outlaw sees his own predicament as resembling that of John Ridd, who likewise struggles against the circumstances of his low birth. As a backcloth to his own life, Ridd’s tale of bravery elevates Kelly’s fate and sanctions his actions by providing a familiar precedent. This narrative appropriation, along with the telling references to Robin Hood and Rob Roy (285– 86), shows that Ned Kelly regards himself as belonging to the lineage of historical and fictional personages who, like him, have fought a desperate and officially unsanctioned battle against acts of keenly perceived injustice perpetrated by those in power.

True History is also interesting for the present analysis because it discloses a dual agenda of mythopoiesis and mythoclasm. Just as the writer sets out to prove wrong some of the prevalent images of Kelly, he, at the same time, substitutes one version of the life-story of Kelly for another. The official accounts of the Kelly Outbreak, as can be found in news items from the time (some of which have been pasted into the novel in what appears to be an act of source-criticism), get discredited and replaced by Ned’s own ‘true’ history. Neither of them, to be sure, is any more true or false than the other. One is based on what is said to have happened, and the other on myth-making, on the re-
imagining of a story that Australians – Carey felt – “haven’t really thought nearly enough about”; by exploring the crevices between the historical facts which are used as a sort of scaffolding to the story, the author prompts his readers to stop being “lazy” about their best-known yet, paradoxically, underimagined story and to explore the creative potential of their national récit and, along with it, the implications it has for the Australian nation. Hence Kelly’s autobiography by no means seeks to deprive the Kelly story of its mythic value by coming across as a definitive account that suffocates all further investigation. Rather, with its ostentatious truthfulness, it asks to be interrogated, asks the reader to consider the implications of this story or its versions for their Australianness. And it illustrates well Clunies Ross’s assessment of the tenacity of myth: “myths persist, despite the efforts of historians [to demythologize them], until they are countered by new myths” (503). The vacuum created by the state of true and absolute history with its inherent mythlessness will spur man on to spin new yarns.

In *My Life as a Fake*, a fictional rendering of the Ern Malley affair, Carey, the “master of storytelling,” again indulges in the re-creation of what Peter Porter calls an “archetypal Australian legend”; but this time, says Porter in his review of the novel, it “is fresher than Ned Kelly.” This may be because the “mythical” figure of Ern Malley has attracted not nearly as much attention as that of Kelly. While Carey’s outlaw is not entirely man-made – he really lived – Ern Malley is entirely a figment, a fiction so true that it came to life and entailed for Malley’s publisher (not for the actual perpetrators) a degrading obscenity trial before the Supreme Court of Victoria. Carey’s version of the Malley affair is revealingly mythologized. He suspends *My Life as a Fake* between the Prometheus myth, one of the most frequently consulted in Western literature, and that of Isis and Osiris. Both of these myths are transported into the book through literary texts – not surprising, in a novel set in a high-brow literary milieu and, moreover, saturated with allusions to classics from the literary canon. 30 Prometheus penetrates *My Life as a Fake* via Mary

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26 See the interview “The ‘contrarian streak’,,” above.
29 Used in, for example, Boccaccio’s massive encyclopedia of classical myths, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (1373), in Calderón’s *La estuta de Prometeo* (1679), in Goethe’s dramatic fragment *Prometheus* (1773) and his poem “Prometheus” (1774), and in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound” (1820) – to name only a few of the major writers who have engaged with that particular myth.
30 Vis-à-vis the following inventory of intertextual references, a profound knowledge of the Western literary canon certainly proves beneficial to a critical appreciation
Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which serves as a direct intertext (the motto of the former being a quotation from the latter). And the myth of Isis and Osiris comes into the novel through Milton’s pamphlet “Areopagitica” (1644). Troubled by the Ordinance of Printing passed in the previous year, Milton here takes up the motif of *sparagmos* related to the myth and uses it to illustrate the manner in which the “sad friends of Truth” imitate the search Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris. Carey makes use of the myth by employing the motif of *sparagmos* as a structural element: he has the hoaxter Chubb ritually murdered and dismembered by his Chinese wardens, thus resolving the complications of the plot.\(^{31}\) Also, *sparagmos* as the search for truth (as filtered through Milton) is referred to at the very end of the novel when Sarah Wode–Douglass, unable to tell the truth from the lies in the case of McCorkle (and of her own life), embarks on her search for the facts in what presents itself to her as a “horrid puzzle” (265). It is entirely in keeping with the mythic framework that Carey refers to Wode–Douglass’s search as a “quest” (265), especially so because— as Northrop Frye explains in his *Anatomy of Criticism*— *sparagmos* (the ritual tearing-apart of a sacrificial body) forms an integral part of the quest-myth.\(^{32}\)

Although the novel engages directly with mythic pretexts from the long-shadowed past, the fabrication of distinctly Australian myths is also on its poetic agenda.\(^{33}\) Carey significantly employs mythologems, i.e., narrative pat-
terns and topoi, which recur in representations of the Australian experience: the widely held belief of Australian hostility towards the fine arts; the inhumanity of the legal system; the sense of Australian culture as being inauthentic, faked, a culture of the second-hand; and, related to this, the topos of cultural insecurity. Given the prominence of these issues in Australian public discourse, *My Life as a Fake* calls urgently for a reading that goes beyond purely aesthetic appreciation. In fact, the novel invites a reading in terms of postcolonial criticism. After all, in Carey’s variation on the Frankensteinean narrative pattern, his monster strikes back by *writing back*. McCorkle’s literary testament, says the narrator, bears the “fierce sarcastic title” (256) *My Life as a Fake* and is perceived by Chubb as “an accusation” (258) levelled against the exercise of his artistic mastery. One feels very much tempted to see in this act of textual revenge an ironic comment on the writing-back paradigm. McCorkle, observes Chubb, rewrites history like a revisionist anatomist–historian: “McCorkle was indeed a genius. He had ripped up history and nailed it back together with its viscera on the outside, all that glistening green truth showing in the rip marks” (235). An allegorical reading of the novel confirms its postcolonial relevance. *My Life as a Fake*, namely, amounts to more than the personal “J’Accuse…!” of a fictional character who, for the sake of the exigencies of the plot, is denied the benefits of parentage and is instead delivered from his creator’s imagination at the age of twenty-four (151); it is more than the revenge of “the damaged beast of the antipodes” (82) who “had his country stolen” (232). Over against the Australian experience at large, McCorkle embodies what Australians tend to see as their unnatural birth and the repercussions this has had for the nation’s collective consciousness. As abject postcolonial writing-back, his literary creation turns out to be a vindication of his own authenticity in the face of his unpromising origins: “where I live I am not a joke at all, not a fake in any way” (152). Surely this will not have gone unnoticed by Australian readers, who seem eternally haunted by the notorious issue of Australian cultural authenticity, or, rather, the lack of it.

typal Australian legends” – commends Carey for his “inventive resurrection of Australia’s first and most haunting appearance of the New Prometheus” (“Spooked by a Spoof,” 54).
The Stories of Bog Onion Road as Community-Building Discourse

Abounding with stories of all sorts, *Bliss* stands out as the Carey novel that most clearly illustrates the emancipatory use to which stories can be put if they are not borrowed from the cultures of the country’s colonizers, Great Britain and the USA, and if they apply to the specific *conditio humana* in Australia. Its chief mythmaker is Harry Joy. For him, the creation of myth through storytelling is not an ostentatious entertainment as it is for the illy-whacker Herbert Badgery, who makes a show out of the stories he tells; and the storytelling which Joy engages in also differs significantly from, say, Ned Kelly’s: his rationale is not self-interest, it is ceremony. The benchmark against which his stories are measured is their value as myth.

A *Bildungsroman, Bliss* recounts Harry Joy’s progress through the various stages of heaven and hell; at the same time, it charts the gradual evolution of an ethic of storytelling. Before reaching the state of heavenly bliss in the last chapter, Harry is already a passionate but unsuccessful storyteller. Throughout his life in hell, the significance of the tales he tells eludes him: “And that was the story, in Harry’s hands a poor directionless thing, left to bump around by itself and mean what you wanted it to, although it was not without effect and young David Joy sat silently before its sword-sharp edges.”34 Their lack of specific meaning makes them dangerous and open to abuse; David Joy, infested with his family’s stories, dies by living one of them (201–202). It is only when Harry escapes from his life in hell (hell being, significantly, a concept imported from the Christian tradition) that he attains proficiency in storytelling:

He was not only liked, he was also necessary. […] he could tell a story for a funeral and a story for a birth. When they sat around the fire at night he could tell a long story just for fun, in the same way Richard might play his old accordion and Dani her Jew’s harp. He never thought of what he did as original. It wasn’t either. He told Vance’s old stories, but told them better because he now understood them. He retold the stories of Bog Onion Road. And when he told stories about the trees and the spirits of the forest he was only dramatizing things that people already knew, shaping them just as you pick up rocks scattered on the ground to make a cairn. He was merely sewing together the bright patchworks of lives, legends, myths, beliefs, hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a richer glow to all their lives. He knew when it was right to tell one story and not another. He knew how a story could give

strength or hope. He knew stories, important stories, so sad he could hardly tell them for weeping. (290–91)

For the “refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsam of belief and ceremony to cling to,” Harry’s stories have a clear community-building effect. His special skill is to give “value to a story so that it [is] something of worth, as important, in its way, as a strong house or a good dam” (291). “Hungry for ceremony and story” (291), Harry’s listeners, one can feel, are in the same predicament as Nietzsche’s “mythless man” who, on the brink of a demythologized world of facts, is “eternally hungry” for a “mythical home, the mythical maternal womb.”35 They crave for his stories, because they can relate to and find nourishment in them.

Within the moral universe of the novel, stories become myths when they are meaningful for, and applicable to, Australians, and when they cause them no “embarrassment” (291), unlike the imported foreign stories. The poetic logic then demands the uncompromising dismissal of all narratives that monopolized and marginalized Australians in the past. With its countercultural rejection of the grand narrative of American economic and cultural expansionism – the country’s ruthless capitalist business dealings, its fast-food culture and its Cadillacs – there is an unmistakably nationalist tone to the commune’s self-centredness. Before the wider canvas of Australia’s coming of age as a postcolonial nation, the recuperative effect of Harry’s rejection of the American success-story is highly significant. The last chapter therefore turns out to be more than a pastoral tableau inspired by the personal memories of the real-life author. Rather, it posits Harry Joy, as Ralph Pordzik suggests, as a

founding figure of a genuinely postcolonial culture emancipating itself from the imported tales and legends of the imperial (capitalist) past. Accordingly, Bog Onion is not a timeless utopia of static perfection, but rather a site of exchange between the different versions of its own past circulating among the dwellers, a place that gradually grows into existence with each new story invented and memorized, each tale retold and transferred to the next generation in search of the cultural pattern that suits its perceptions and its hopes for a future in dignity and self-respect.36

35 Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, 136.

36 Ralph Pordzik, The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures (Studies of World Literature in English 10; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001): 77. See also Graeme Turner’s similar assessment in “American Dreaming: The Fictions of Peter Carey,” Australian Literary Studies 12.4 (1986): 441.
Although the shaman-like figure of Harry Joy and his fellow commune-dwellers exude a certain sense of parochialism, the novel is nevertheless highly significant in the present analysis because it ardently advocates a rethinking of the cultural cringe by the strategic use of mythic narrative.

A Magic Mirror for Australia

Peter Carey’s mythistory of Australia is a forceful illustration of the power of storytelling. In Bliss, as Pordzik observes in the above-quoted passage, the commune “gradually grows into existence with each story told”; in My Life as a Fake, Bob McCorkle creates a whole country in his eponymously entitled testament (247); in True History, Ned Kelly writes in order to get his daughter born.37 Because of their power, stories also need to be handled carefully; if told in the wrong place or at the wrong time, they quickly lose their splendour, or even turn against their tellers. Transplanting myths from the Old World to the New, for example, deprives them of their intrinsic value. In Oscar and Lucinda, for instance, the stories Oscar carries in his “sweat-slippery leather Bible” (492) simply fail to prevail against the resident mythology of the Aborigines. Likewise, in True History, the Kelly family’s imported Irish mythology and its accompanying rituals quickly lose their mythic power and appeal, which subsequently leads to their dismissal:

In the colony of Victoria my parents witnessed the slow wasting of St. Brigit though my mother made the straw crosses for the lambing and followed all Grandma Quinn’s instructions it were clear St. Brigit had lost her power to bring the milk down from the cow’s horn. The beloved saint withered in Victoria she could no longer help the calving and thus slowly passed from our reckoning. (88)

The imported grand narratives of Christianity, American commercialism and British imperialism – the logic of Carey’s novels invites us to infer – are equally inappropriate for Australians, for within these narratives they only find themselves as a second-hand country, a marginal note in the progress of world-civilization.

In his mythistorical novels, Carey advocates a form of storytelling which helps Australians to claim their country through the imagination. Aboriginal Australians did just that when they developed their Dreamtime mythology:

The country was thick with sacred stories […]. He [Oscar] did not even imagine their presence. Some of these stories were as small as the transparent

anthropods that lived in the puddles beneath the river casuarinas. These stories were like fleas, thrip, so tiny that they might inhabit a place (inside the ears of the seeds of grass) he would later walk across without even seeing. In this landscape every rock had a name, and most names had spirits, ghosts, meanings. (492)

This paean to myth, taken from Oscar and Lucinda, may stand as a model for Carey’s strategy of translating the sometimes ungraspable Antipodean reality into more familiar terms. In his mythistory of Australia, he accordingly seeks to infuse the transplanted people’s lost past (hence also their present) with myth and thus holds up a magic mirror to the “Orphan in the Pacific,”38 which visualizes and clarifies key episodes of the Australian experience. With respect to the busload of pensioners at the beginning of this essay, Carey’s novels help to complement the alphabet of Australian culture by building up a reservoir of myth, a narrative treasure-trove which will eventually provide Australians with the material they need to celebrate their Antipodean existence.

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38 Name of a chapter in David Malouf’s A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness (Sydney: ABC, 1999): 80–99. Malouf, who – according to Porter – tends like Carey to overindulge in the re-creation of “archetypal Australian legends,” is an interesting companion in mythmaking and the underlying concept of history. In an interview with Helen Daniel, Malouf expounded on the importance of reliving Australian history through historical novels – “the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people’s entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction” – and the importance of myth therein. The specific form of discourse to be used in such novels he significantly terms “myth history,” which, as in Carey’s novels, he sees as instrumental in the process of Australia’s coming of age: “Of course dream or myth has a particular quality for us, something where we touch on very deep things but we don’t ask what their meaning is. We recognise them as forces that are at work in us that we don’t fully understand and whose particular importance to us is that we maybe shouldn’t understand them. That’s the extent to which it’s a different history: it’s a dream history, a myth history, a history of experience in the imagination. And I keep wanting to say societies can only become whole, can only know fully what they are when they have relived history in that kind of way”; Helen Daniel, “An Interview with David Malouf,” Australian Book Review 184 (September 1996): 10.
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Cross References

Allusions to Christian Tradition in Peter Carey’s Fiction

CHRISTER LARSSON

Peter Carey’s fiction is rich in evocative imagery, so perhaps it should not surprise us that allusions to Christian tradition are a recurrent feature in his works. However, the use he makes of such allusions is intriguing, since it only rarely seems closely tied to the plots of the different novels, yet it appears to be removed from, and more subtle than, commonplace postmodern cleverness. Only in a few instances do the allusions to Christian lore and Bible stories add significantly to the thematic content of his works, but they nevertheless seem to contribute more than just stimulating imagery. The relative prominence of the allusions is striking also because Carey himself has described his own attitude to religion as markedly detached: “I feel I’m living without religion.”¹ Why would the fiction of a writer who refers to himself as “an atheist”² contain such a large number of references to Christianity?

I will argue that the use of Christian imagery in Carey’s fiction can be seen as serving two different purposes. On the one hand, it might figure as a thematic feature, as it does in, for instance, Oscar and Lucinda. On the other hand, when the allusions seem to carry little or no thematic significance, they are to be regarded instead as narrational devices. In such cases, they are there

to aid the efficient transmission of a fictional story and, consequently, to be regarded as formal features. Occasionally, these categories are not easy to distinguish, as the boundaries between them may be quite permeable. This analysis will begin with an investigation, dominated by a reading of *Oscar and Lucinda*, of some instances where references to Christian traditions have thematic relevance and proceed, via some cases that are difficult to categorize, to deal with certain passages where the allusions function primarily as narrational devices.

It is not uncommon for Carey’s plots to concern issues central to works of other postcolonial writers, and in some of his fiction Christianity is dealt with from a clearly postcolonial perspective. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, for instance, a love story whose plot revolves around a glass church and a wager, Christianity is seen as an invader, partly personified by Oscar, who transports the church through the wilderness and becomes a witness to the slaughter of Aborigines.\(^3\) The narrative in the relevant passage is taken over by Kumbaingiri Billy, who tells the story of how his tribe encountered white men for the first time. They see the disassembled glass church, and their first observation is that the vitreous substance is sharp and possibly threatening: “it cuts. Cuts trees. Cuts the skin of the tribes” (469). In this instance, the destructive and oppressive potential of the invading ideology is emphasized, not only by the attention afforded the dangerous qualities of the glass church, but also by the voice of the new narrator. As Ruth Brown points out, “there is no space for other, equally valid ways of telling the story of their [the Aborigines’] death and dispossession.”\(^4\) Christianity in *Oscar and Lucinda* can be seen, in passages such as this, as a parallel to the Voorstandish myths in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, where the stories about Bruder Mouse are imposed on the people of Efica by the colonizing power Voorstand. The Voorstandish myths are secular and their purpose is to some extent commercial; but the power structure is similar. As in *Tristan Smith*, where the narrative is controlled by Tristan, who represents the oppressed Eficans, the storytelling in *Oscar and Lucinda* is taken over by Kumbaingiri Billy when Christianity enters the Aborigines’ world.

However, it is clear even from a cursory glance that *Oscar and Lucinda* is ambiguous in its view of Christianity. On the one hand, Oscar, who attempts to bring Christianity into the wilderness in the guise of a glass church, is a character we are encouraged to sympathize with; on the other hand, Christian-

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ity’s role in the oppression of the Aborigines is underscored by the narrator’s
delineation of it. Consequently, the thematic content of the novel becomes
difficult to evaluate and there seems to be no easily distinguishable moral
message to be derived from *Oscar and Lucinda*.

At the same time, the ambiguous attitude to Christianity is consistent with
other thematic features of the novel – especially the strong attraction to para-
dox felt by the two main characters, which is central to the narrative. Like the
glass church which they design and which Oscar undertakes to deliver, glass
embodies many of the appealing qualities of paradox. To Lucinda, “the lovely
contradictory nature of glass” (135) seems to offer all possibilities at once,
and this is what is attractive to her. It seems to save her from having to make
choices, to have to exclude one possibility in favour of another. A house of
glass would have the same advantage: it would look open but would be just as
closed as any other house; on the other hand, glass is solid but transparent and
fragile and obviously provides very little in the way of shelter. The wager
they agree upon when Oscar bets that he will deliver the glass church no later
than Good Friday is also an attempt to escape decision-making: if he manages,
Lucinda will give him her significant fortune, which will obligate him to
marry her. The wager is, in fact, a disguised declaration of love and proposal
of marriage. The glass construction Oscar and Lucinda conceive together is
equally deceptive, and, as Graham Huggan points out, the church becomes a
“paradoxical figure” for their “union/disruption,” causing their wager to be
infused with tragic irony.\(^5\) By the end of the novel, it is clear that Lucinda has
yet to attain the insight that paradox, being inherently inconsistent, cannot be
consistently beneficial. Moreover, neither Oscar’s nor Lucinda’s comprehen-
sion of a wager includes the realization that something inherently random
cannot provide order and stability.

In Oscar’s case, his fascination with paradox is clearly a product of his reli-
gious beliefs and the nature of his faith.\(^6\) Although it is Oscar who suggests
that Lucinda’s dreams of glass should be realized in the construction of a
glass church (384), this turns out to have little to do with religion, but it is
nevertheless the result “of habits of mind produced by Christianity” (383).
When Oscar suggests the wager to Lucinda, he believes that he has found a
strategy for winning her love. The glass church is to be transported through
the wilderness to where Dennis Hasset, the man Lucinda has led Oscar to
believe she is engaged to, works as a priest. Oscar feels hopelessly inferior to

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5 Graham Huggan, “Is the (Günter) Grass Greener on the Other Side? Oskar and

6 I adhere to the common “distinction between belief in a set of propositions and a
faith which enables us to put our trust in them”; Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*
Hasset, and in his desperation he has worked out a way to gain what he desires: “He could think of nothing to do to press his claim in competition, nothing except to display an excess of goodness, of selflessness, as if this behaviour, this loving self-denial, would provide him with the rewards that selfishness could not” (380). Oscar’s strategy is paradoxical and clearly prompted by his complex faith.

In fact, it is easy to trace the origin of Oscar’s inspiration for his strategy to win Lucinda and for the bet he proposes. Oscar’s gamble, which is “a knife of an idea, but also one of great beauty, silvery, curved, dancing with light” (383), seems to be related to the promise in John 12:25: “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal”; or, as it is phrased in Matthew 16:25: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.” In Oscar’s version, when the object of desire is romantic love, the promise becomes distorted and confused. Paradoxically, if he managed to render himself as selfless as he aspires to be, he would leave nothing for Lucinda to love. Nevertheless, he allows his course to be set by his attraction to paradox and his conviction that practicality is somehow opposed to spirituality (385).

Oscar’s faith in his religious beliefs is in conflict with some of his beliefs about the physical world. His father is a dedicated scientist who is also a fundamentalist Christian, and the complexities inherent in such a world-view have been passed on to Oscar. However, Oscar does not see any problem in attempting to reconcile these two disparate systems of thought when explaining his literalist faith to his friend Wardley–Fish:

“And do I believe that Balaam’s ass really spoke to him in a human voice? Yes, of course. Although I hear at Oriel that I am quite out of fashion and everyone would have me believe that Jonah was not swallowed by the whale and that the mother of our Lord was not a virgin, and all this from people who have sworn their acceptance of the Thirty-nine Articles of Faith.”

“So the ass really said: ‘I am thy good and faithful ass. Why have you therefore smitten me thrice?’ The ass spoke like this, to a man, in Greek?”

“I doubt it was Greek. Have you ever seen a starfish? Under the microscope, in cross section? Do you not think God created the starfish?”

“Of course,” and Wardley–Fish who had, until that moment, been unscrewing his brandy flask, now screwed it up again and slid it back into his pocket.

“Then having Balaam’s ass speak, even in Greek, would be a comparatively easy thing to achieve.” (112)

7 All biblical references in this text are to the King James Version.
Oscar’s argument is a variation on how natural science is sometimes incorporated in the Christian faith. The rhetoric is similar to that of Philip Gosse, who argued that the theory of evolution had been made possible by God as a test. In this case, however, Oscar uses science to explain his literalism in a way that is completely in keeping with his attraction to paradox and is symptomatic of how he orders his beliefs. In many ways, he is a very logical man, but his often exaggeratedly rational approach to the physical world – exemplified by his complex system for betting on horses, or when he organizes buttons according to elaborate principles – is completely enclosed by his religious faith.

The subordination of rational faculties marks Oscar’s faith as a kind of fideism, or religious irrationalism. While in no way dismissing or mistrusting his capacity for rational thought, Oscar actively rejects the idea that faith can be justified on logical grounds. As we can see from his argument above, he does not seek to prove anything. Rather, he suggests that if God can create the starfish, then He can do anything. The belief that God made the starfish is no more or less credible than the belief that He caused an ass to speak. Both of these propositions are of a kind that can either be accepted or rejected, but if we accept one there is no apparent reason to reject the other. Indeed, Oscar himself seems at least partly aware of his fideism, when he explains his faith to Lucinda:

“Our whole faith is a wager, Miss Leplastrier. We bet – it is all in Pascal and very wise it is too, although the Queen of England might find him not nearly Presbyterian enough – we bet that there is a God. We bet our life on it. We calculate the odds, the return, that we shall sit with the saints in paradise. Our anxiety about our bet will wake us before dawn in a cold sweat.” (261)

The reference to Blaise Pascal’s famous wager draws attention to Oscar’s fideism. The assumption behind Pascal’s wager is that if we bet on God’s existence, we have everything to gain but nothing to lose. If we are right, we gain eternal life, but if we are wrong there are no consequences. However,

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8 As Carey himself points out in his “Acknowledgements,” parts of the portrayal of Oscar’s childhood are adapted from Edmund Gosse’s Father and Son (1907) and Theophilus Hopkins is partly modelled on Philip Gosse, who, in an attempt to refute Darwinian biology, “proposed that God had placed all those fossils in a plausibly misleading pattern in order to test our faith”; Ian G. Barbour, Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues (New York: HarperCollins, 1997): 57.

9 Like Oscar, Pascal was not looking for a way to prove the existence of God, since that would result in “a being of no religious interest.” Faith cannot be construed as a “valid argument from the world” to the divine: “Arguments and proofs can produce no more than a temporary and superficial assent […]”; Don Cupitt, The Sea of Faith (London: SCM, 2nd ed. 1994): 58. For an interesting discussion of fideism and irrationalism, see C. Stephen Evans, Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account
Oscar manages to turn even the combination of his two greatest passions – God and gambling – into a paradox. The sort of fideism he advocates in this passage demands a voluntary loss of control – one must relinquish a degree of command over one’s life – and this is something Oscar tries to resist. Oscar’s obsessive gambling is at once a reenactment of Pascal’s wager and an attempt to force some kind of order on a chaotic world.

If Pascal’s wager seems fairly safe, the three major gambles that Oscar undertakes are much more dangerous; indeed, his bet with Lucinda proves fatal. It is preceded by two gambles which come to have a monumental impact on Oscar. What looks like a game of hopscotch (but which Oscar’s father mistakes for pagan scribbles) prompts Oscar to leave the Plymouth Brethren and study to become an Anglican priest. This gamble takes place in Chapter 9, “Throwing Lots.” This is followed up by a second gamble in Chapter 42, “Called,” where Oscar lets a coin decide whether he should go to New South Wales or not. These are the two gambles that place the hydrophobic Oscar in the belly of the Leviathan, the ship that is to transport him across the dreaded sea, and on board which he will meet Lucinda. The consequences of that meeting Oscar will not dare to formulate as anything other than the terms of his final fatal wager.

The sequence of events can be seen as a partial reversal of the familiar story of Jonah. Called by God to visit the city of Nineveh, and commanded to warn its inhabitants about possible punishment for their sinful ways, but fearing a violent reception, Jonah tries to escape by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish. The ship sails into a storm which God has sent in its way, and the sailors understand that someone on board the ship has in some way offended God. They gather to find out who it is and to determine what he has done: “And they said everyone to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.”

When Jonah has explained how he has angered God, the sailors throw him into the sea, and there he is swallowed by a large fish. In popular imagination, this fish or whale has often been identified with Leviathan, the beast God uses as an example to intimidate Job and convince him of his powerlessness, and which has been assumed to be some sort of sea

(Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), which also mentions Pascal’s wager (49). It may be appropriate to note that the purpose of Pascal’s wager is to convert atheists who do not believe in life after death. It would not seem to have the desired effect on opponents who adhere to any other theistic religious persuasion.

10 Jonah 1:7. The Old Testament clearly demonstrates a belief in gambling as a method for settling disputes by appealing to divine influence: the lots would fall as God wished them to fall (cf Leviticus 16:7–10).
monster: “Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?”11 Jonah is first called and then, after a gamble, thrown into the sea and devoured by the great fish. In Oscar’s case, his temporary residence within the Leviathan is necessitated by an initial gamble, when he throws lots and leaves the Plymouth Brethren. Only later does Oscar feel called by God to cross the sea, and although he is afraid, he does not try to escape his calling: instead, he confirms God’s command by the rather unceremonious flipping of a coin.

However, the item of thematic significance here is not the similarity to or divergence from one specific Bible story, but the affiliation with a group of stories where life is seen as a journey across dangerous waters. This is a recurrent narrative pattern in the Bible, and can be exemplified by Noah’s Ark and Jonah in the Old Testament. The symbolism is perhaps clearest in the New Testament, which includes a perilous sea-journey not only by boat but also on foot. The disciples are on a boat “in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves.”12 When Jesus, walking on the turbulent sea, meets the boat, Peter calls to him: “Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.”13 When Peter is out of the boat, he is frightened by the waves and begins to sink. Jesus saves him and reproaches him for his faltering faith.14 This is exactly the sort of journey Oscar undertakes when he leaves England on the Leviathan: a journey which will test and hopefully fortify his faith. When Oscar learns the most difficult paradox of faith, that it is “a sin to doubt” and that doubt is “the highest state for a Christian,” the necessary journey is prefigured by the description of his reaction to this baffling problem: “Oscar held on, like a frightened boy on a high mast in a big sea” (74). His traumatic introduction to Anglicanism sends him on his way across the waters to ensure his salvation.

If we see Oscar’s journey as one with a primarily spiritual goal, his phobia about water is highly significant, and influences how we understand the fact that he decides to undertake the long sea-journey to New South Wales. In fact, the intense fear Oscar experiences while on board the ship can be seen as a necessary part of the endeavour. Fear has been regarded as a moderating, humbling force, and it is this force that God seeks to underpin when He describes Leviathan to Job. This is more than a simple abuse of power on God’s part: it is a reminder that fear might be a valuable source of guidance. Mystical traditions have seized on this theme and elaborated the role of fear:

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11 Job 41:1. When Theophilus hears the name of the ship, he thinks of Job 41:12–15 and 19–23, where the monster is described (215–16).
12 Matthew 14:4.
13 Matthew 14:28.
As it is not possible to cross the ocean without a boat or a ship, so no one can cross towards love, without fear. This foetid sea, which lies between us and the intelligible paradise, we cross in the boat of repentance, which has fear for a rudder. [...] Repentance is the ship, fear is her governor, love is the divine port.15

Clearly, this description of the sea-journey and the significance of fear are applicable to Oscar’s case, since his is a journey of repentance in hope of paradise, but it also results in his meeting Lucinda and his discovery of romantic love. However, as we have seen, Oscar’s application of spiritual principles to the physical world is confused and unsuccessful.

By grounding the thematic content of the text in the tradition it is critical of, Carey makes possible a higher degree of complexity than would have been possible otherwise. Oscar’s ambiguous condition is reflected not only as a description of his state of mind and the peculiarities of his faith, but also as a quality of the novel itself: it comes to act as a regulating force on our understanding of the text. Ambiguity becomes a condition for reading the novel, and no reading that fails to take this ambiguity into account can be quite adequate. In terms of allusions to Christian tradition, this holds true for several of Carey’s novels, and some imagery becomes difficult to interpret, or even identify. While we may see that an allusion is being made, its evasiveness prevents us from making a clear evaluation of its significance. It may be difficult to determine whether the allusion has a bearing on thematic aspects or whether it is to be seen as a narrative device. One case where the blurring of the distinction between thematic content and narrative form becomes acute is Carey’s use of ambiguous Christ-figures.

Obviously, describing any fictional character as a Christ-figure – even an ambiguous one – is a risky undertaking, since the image of Christ bears so much potential significance that the interpretation risks spinning out of control. A narrative with such a character in it may seem to acquire several possible meanings, since it may be understood as, among other things, devotional or allegorical. I will claim no such meanings for Carey’s fiction.16 Rather, I


16 Clearly, Carey’s novels are not in any sense devotional, and although they may have allegorical potential, I agree with Graham Huggan, who warns against “easy readings” of Carey’s works as allegories, since such readings may be reductive in failing to take into account the unique complexity of the novels; Huggan, Peter Carey (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1996): 75.
will argue that the possibility of seeing traits and features of certain characters as partial allusions to Christ charges any interpretation of the novels with expectations, and an ingredient in any reading will be a reaction to how those expectations are fulfilled or frustrated. The effect may be irony or satire, as we measure the concurrence with or divergence from our original assumptions. Occasionally, the expectations created by a character’s resemblance to Christ will be of a more direct kind. At that point we are dealing with an elaborate form of foreshadowing, and in such cases the allusions to Christian tradition are pertinent to formal analysis but carry very little or no thematic significance. The protagonists of Carey’s two earliest published novels can be used to demonstrate how the interplay between allusions and resultant expectations works to produce a sense of irony. It should be pointed out that neither Harry Joy in Bliss nor Herbert Badgery in Illywhacker can be seen as a consistent portrayal of a Christ-like character. However, at crucial points, the characterization of each protagonist involves vague and puzzling allusions to the life of Christ.

Herbert Badgery is not only the protagonist of Illywhacker, but also Carey’s most intriguing narrator. His introduction of himself as “a terrible liar” (11) compels us to doubt his reliability at every turn. Moreover, Herbert himself attempts to blur the distinction between lies and storytelling, often stating explicitly that he regards lies as a form of art (33, 79, 186), and his narrative is full of gaps and inconsistencies. At the point Herbert chooses as the beginning for his narrative, he is 33 years old – “mythically speaking, just the right age,” as Helen Daniel puts it.17 Jesus is often assumed to have been 33 at the time of his crucifixion, but dating the crucifixion is notoriously problematic, and, as we shall see, Herbert’s age is also uncertain. It is from “November 1919, when I was thirty-three years old” (12) that Herbert counts “the days of my adult life” (40). That would mean that he was born in 1886. However, he also claims to have been ten years old in June 1895 (40). These facts do not agree, and Herbert was either born in 1886 and 33 years old in 1919, or ten years old in 1895 and born in 1885. The latter alternative would make him 34 years old in 1919. Herbert claims to be 139 years old at the time of narration but also suggests that this age is inconsistent with his date of birth: “The chart on my door says I am a hundred and thirty-nine years old. It also says I was born in 1886, but there are no complaints” (599).18 Inconsistencies

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18 Herbert’s age has been discussed by a number of critics, and different writers have arrived at different conclusions. Some decide to believe him when he says that he is 139 years old and conclude that the narration takes place in 2025. Others argue that he is not telling the truth and that he is in fact about 100 years old. See Richard Todd,
in the narrative make Herbert’s age impossible to determine conclusively at any point in the story.

Herbert’s elusiveness about his age is an appropriate illustration of his confessed vanity (227), and later in the story, when he meets his lover Leah, he lies about his age again (303). Herbert’s somewhat pretentious revisionist approach to his own history, vaguely reminiscent of Aleister Crowley, prompts him to “count as the day of my birth” the day he may or may not have killed his father (40–41).19 When considering the reliability of a first-person narrator, even one as blatantly honest about his dishonesty as Herbert, vanity and conceitedness are factors the reader needs to be aware of and take into account. Combined with vanity, his delusions about his own importance make him decide on an appropriate age for the beginning of his adult life: the age Jesus was at the time of his crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection and ascension to Heaven.

Herbert, whose lies eventually transform into stories, can be compared with Harry Joy, the protagonist of Bliss. Harry is a storyteller who cannot seem to keep his stories from turning into lies. There are ambiguities about Harry’s life-span as well, and these are highlighted at the very opening of the novel: “Harry Joy was to die three times” (11). However, the ambiguity does not concern chronology – on the contrary, the chronology is made uncommonly clear from the outset – but, rather, Harry’s metaphysical status. Following his second death, Harry believes that he has been sent to Hell. The novel tells us about his journey from his first to his third death, and the outcome is never in doubt. In fact, his last death becomes the implicit goal of the narrative, and although the narrative voice tells us that it is “his first death” that has “the greatest effect on him” (11), it is the description of his final death which is the most interesting for our present purposes:

Soon the branch of a tree will fall on him. A branch of a tree he has planted himself, one of his precious yellow boxes, a variety prized by bee-keepers but known to forest workers as widow-makers [...] because of their habit, on quiet, windless days like this one, of dropping heavy limbs.


Cross References

Any moment this thirty-year-old tree is going to perform the treacherous act of falling on to the man who planted it, while bees continue to gather their honey uninterrupted on the outer branches.

There – it is done. (295)

Here we are presented with a cluster of potent but bewildering images. First, it is notable that we are reminded that this event has been determined from the beginning. The narrative voice starts out in the future tense and shifts, as the event approaches, into the present tense. This emphasis on the inevitability of the event strengthens its significance. The determinism that is implied by the description in this passage makes Harry’s death a mythic event and effects closure to the narrative. Bliss could not do without Harry’s death any more than Jesus could escape the crucifixion. The “thirty-year-old tree” makes us think of Christ being hung on the cross,20 and “it is done” is an obvious paraphrase of Christ’s last words before death in John 19:30: “It is finished.” The only story that remains to be told is that of Harry’s legacy, and it consists in the revelation that the narrative voice belongs to “the children of Harry Joy and Honey Barbara” (295) – a testimony that Harry has managed to salvage his stories for future generations. It has not been possible to tell this story earlier, and it is Harry’s death that releases it and frees his children to finally tell their own story.

Clearly, these teasing allusions add very little to the thematic content of Bliss or Illywhacker. Nor do the facts that a large snake plays an important role when Herbert and Phoebe are forced to leave her parents’ home; or that Harry Joy’s partner, like Mary Magdalene, is a prostitute. Instead, this jumble of imagery and allusions is designed to communicate certain expectations to the reader. In these cases, such expectations are there to be frustrated, and the irony in Illywhacker, for instance, becomes clear when we find, at crucial points in the narrative, allusions to the life of Christ, and at the same time understand the extent of Herbert’s vanity. Similarly, concerning Harry in Bliss, irony is to be found in the fact that a “Good Bloke” (13) who undergoes an ethical awakening is exalted to the point of becoming the mythic beginning of something greater. There is also a satirical effect: Harry’s rather simplistic moral view of the universe, as represented in the last ‘pastoral’ part of the novel, is implicitly measured against the general ethical awareness in contemporary society and found superior.

There is a lighter and more humorous echo of the beatification of Harry Joy in Carey’s book for children, The Big Bazoochley. After the events in the story have come to a resolution, a painting is made to commemorate the

20 In the Bible, the death of Christ is sometimes described as occurring on a tree (see, for instance, Acts 5:30).
adventure. The first description of this painting occurs in a striking prolepsis: “Years later, when the adventure was all over, Vanessa Kellow painted *Toronto in a Matchbox*, the masterpiece that made her famous.”21 The very small painting offers an impossibly detailed view of Toronto, and as the protagonist Sam is about to join the other Perfecto Kiddo competitors the narrator describes this scene as it is represented in the picture:

In this delicate perfect world, you will see the Perfecto Kiddo banners. You will see three great crystal chandeliers. You will see an upper gallery in which people have crowded to look down at the spectacle below. In this gallery you might recognize Muriel and George, and in the ballroom below you should be able to find the small figure of Sam Kellow walking to take his place at the beginning of the Perfecto Kiddo Competition. (90)

The description shifts from telling us what the painting shows to telling us what it cannot show: “It is really too small a painting to show you the expression on his face” (90). However, as it turns out, the painting does show quite a lot, in spite of its tininess. The epilogue contains a longer and more detailed description of the painting, closing the narrative and providing information about what happens to the different characters. The painting emphasizes the happy resolution – a celebration in a restaurant – and shows us the fate of the kidnappers George and Muriel:

Muriel, of course, is in the painting, too, but not (thank heavens!) in the restaurant. She is in three different places in the painting. She is standing in the gallery above the ballroom. She is outside the hotel being helped into an ambulance. She is in a helicopter rising up above the snowbound city. If you look closely at the helicopter with that magnifying glass, you will see not only two unhappy grown-up faces but one very happy kid’s face as well: It is Wilfred sitting beside the pilot, wearing his Blue Jays cap.

Where are Muriel and George and Wilfred going?
The painting does not tell you.

Is Wilfred about to begin a happier life? Will anyone ever let him take a chance?

No one can be certain, but from that day forward there were never any more Perfecto Kiddo competitions, and to that extent the world that Wilfred lived in was a much, much better place. (131–32)

Anthony J. Hassall points out, correctly in my opinion, that the painting serves the specific purpose of “fram[ing] the narrative [...], reminding readers

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However, there is more to the painting than reassurance. The synoptic mode of representation in the painting, where a succession of events is illustrated in one frame and the same character occurs in different places depending on when the action takes place, is often employed in early book illustrations, but also in altarpieces and Renaissance pictures portraying the life of Christ. Consequently, it can be seen as having a second function, as it alludes to representations of Christ and also to illustrations of such classic Christian narratives as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The effect is a fine irony, similar to that in *Bliss*, when young Sam’s failure is presented as a desirable alternative to the Perfecto Kiddo Competition. Sam’s and Harry’s respective acts of rebellion are not premeditated, heroic acts, but the results of panic in the face of intractable situations. Harry is threatened by the law, Sam is threatened by the stern judges at the competition.

Sam Kellow, Harry Joy and Herbert Badgery should not be seen as attempts to produce consistent portrayals of Christ. The allusions to Christ and to representations of Christ serve a different purpose. In these novels, although there is some thematic relevance, the imagery should be seen as a primarily technical tool for achieving specific effects. In all three cases, the references produce a sense of irony. In *Illywhacker* they also provide us with insights about the unreliable narrator. In *Bliss* and *The Big Bazooohley* the satirical tone of the novels is enforced by the dubiously messianic protagonists. These effects could certainly have been achieved by different means, so even if the allusions to Christian tradition in these novels have some thematic significance, their primary purpose is a formal one.

The abundance of religious imagery in *The Tax Inspector* is also relevant primarily to formal analysis. This is perhaps Carey’s most puzzling novel, which may account for the sceptical critical reception it was afforded on its publication. However, despite its modest length and its rigorous formal structure, the novel is extremely rich and adds new dimensions to the themes that recur throughout Carey’s literary production. Its dense storytelling makes it read much like a thriller. The narrator is a traditional omniscient narrator who tells the story from various perspectives and offers as objective an account of events as possible. Although it jumps back and forth in time as characters remember and re-live parts of their past, the narrative is chronologically, being arranged in four chapters named after four consecutive days in the week.

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24 Hassall, *Dancing on Hot Macadam*, 143.
Monday through Thursday. Each chapter is shorter than the one preceding it, as events hasten to a climax. Nevertheless, there is much in this novel that is left unresolved, and it is even unclear whether it has a happy ending or not. An investigation of the vague allusions to the Gospels does not resolve these issues but can give us a good idea of how such references may function as a formal feature.

In *The Tax Inspector*, the allusions to Christian tradition are appropriately deceptive and misleading. One of the central characters – Benny, an abused and abusive teen, the youngest in the family – is psychotic and tries to transform himself into one or several angels. When trying to make sense of the religious imagery, one gets a feeling that his psychosis is contagious. The tax inspector of the title, Maria Takis, is eight months pregnant when she comes to audit the Catchprices’ car firm. A pregnant woman named Maria, whose child’s father is absent, is a familiar and evocative image: “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.” However, there is a peculiar reversal at work here, since Maria is working on behalf of the tax collector and does not enter the story to be taxed herself; this line of interrogation does not seem to lead anywhere. A further complication is the image of the tax collector in the Gospels, where the very title is used as an insult, often in disparaging comparison, as when Jesus tells the Pharisees that “the publicans and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you.” Then again, Maria and the depraved Catchprices are more or less the kind of company Jesus has traditionally been imagined to keep: “And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat [...] many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples.” The implications of this type of reading are too many and too varied to be helpful and will not lead to a consistent interpretation.

The complexities that stand in the way of an unambiguous interpretation of *The Tax Inspector* can be illustrated by looking at different readings of the ending of the novel. Benny has abducted Maria, and the stress causes her to deliver her baby prematurely. When Benny tries to steal the newborn boy, Maria incapacitates him, and before he loses consciousness, Benny hands the child over to Maria. When asked whether he intended “symbolic significance

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25 Carey claims that *The Tax Inspector* has a happy resolution (Willbanks, “Peter Carey on *The Tax Inspector* and *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*,” 12). Elsewhere, I have argued that there is just as good textual support for an unhappy ending: Christer Larsson, “The Relative Merits of Goodness and Originality”: *The Ethics of Storytelling in Peter Carey’s Novels* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2001).


27 Matthew 21:31. The publicans were Jewish tax collectors for the Romans.

28 Matthew 9:10.
in the Christian overtones,” Carey denied any such intention but agreed that the ending of *The Tax Inspector* can be seen as alluding to the Annunciation, with Benny as the angel.\(^{29}\) While Hassall is ambivalent about the novel’s resolution (as well as its aesthetic and ethical merits, it seems), he refers to Carey’s claim that *The Tax Inspector* is “a very moral book. I am actually opposing good and evil in a very basic way and posing a twisted predatory sexuality against a very powerful birth of a child.” Hassall argues that “the book does not allow the reader to escape into the relative comfort of this black and white morality.”\(^{30}\) Any conclusion to be drawn about the ending also depends on whether one sees Benny as the primary threat to Maria’s baby or not. There is textual support for the argument that Benny’s uncle Jack, who is as “damaged, compromised”\(^{31}\) as the other Catchprices, presents as much of a threat.

The chapter divisions can also be seen as an illustration of the ambiguities surrounding the outcome of the novel. The four days of the week can be seen as the week before Easter, excluding Good Friday, which turns the novel into an interrupted passion play. If we accept the suggestions that Maria and Jack’s relationship will continue after the novel has ended, the chapter headings become ominous, since the implied span of the novel extends beyond the pages of the book. In that case, Good Friday would be implicit and Maria’s child will be sacrificed. On the other hand, if we see Benny as the only obstacle to a happy resolution, we could choose to see the omission of Good Friday as significant in the opposite way and as a signal that the sacrifice is cancelled. There does not seem to be conclusive textual proof for either of these readings, however, and we must find another approach if we wish to arrive at a meaningful reading of the novel.

If we hope to make sense of the muddle of allusions and images in *The Tax Inspector*, it is more fruitful to see it as part of the description of the confused world the characters inhabit. The novel is packed with references, and not only to Christian tradition. In the first five pages we can find more than fifteen references to everything from brand names like Salem cigarettes and Turtle Wax to popular phenomena like Judas Priest and Jayne Mansfield. The novel is as much about commercialism and consumption as anything else. In the decaying, distinctly postmodern society of *The Tax Inspector*, everything is always accessible and everything is always for sale, even spiritual growth, as is suggested by the mail-order “Self-Actualization” cassettes, which both

\(^{29}\) Willbanks, “Peter Carey on *The Tax Inspector*,” 11.

\(^{30}\) Hassall, *Dancing on Hot Macadam*, 163.

Benny and Maria have purchased (21, 253). In this world, “angel” has an only marginally more potent meaning than “Sony Trinitron.” The allusions to Christian tradition are best seen simply as part of the setting: as one of many groups of references to Western culture. The direct thematic significance of the allusions to Christianity is limited. Rather, they serve to elaborate the setting and are appropriately seen as having a primarily formal function.

Although the distinction between thematic and formal relevance is sometimes blurred, it is often fruitful to try and localize separate textual events on a scale between these poles. I have so far discussed thematically relevant references to Christian tradition in *Oscar and Lucinda* and a number of instances which are difficult to categorize in other novels. I will turn back to *Oscar and Lucinda* for the clearest example of an allusion which has a purely formal function. In this case, a reference to the Gospels serves to foreshadow an important event in the novel. When Oscar suggests Good Friday as the day when the church should be delivered to Hasset, we have reason to assume that the outcome will not be what he or Lucinda hope for (388). Our suspicions are not, however, based merely on our knowledge of what happened to Christ on Good Friday, but also on Oscar’s reasoning behind the wager he undertakes. His paradoxical plan for winning Lucinda’s love is derived from parts of the Gospels where Jesus predicts his own death on the cross: “The hour is come, that the Son of Man should be glorified.”

Although we have no way of knowing that, whereas Christ will be “lifted up from the earth,” first to be hung on the cross and eventually to ascend into Heaven, Oscar will be sunk and drowned in a river, Oscar’s imminent death is hinted at. Oscar’s paradoxical strategy reveals his own fate and although Good Friday adds nothing of thematic significance, it underpins our suspicions that the wager will end badly for Oscar.

*Oscar and Lucinda* has been referred to as a “post-Christian” novel. This description is apt and relevant to much of Carey’s work. In the same way that he appropriates literary traditions for use in new contexts, he puts Christianity to work in an unexpected context. Although the dominant purpose is secular, some of the ethical significance of Christian tradition is retained. Brown’s comment on the cameo of George Eliot in *Oscar and Lucinda* is enlightening: “If George Eliot as icon is discredited within the novel, her moral seriousness survives.” Christianity is dealt with in a similar way, and while the grounds on which it has been institutionalized are questioned and rejected, its actual

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33 John 12:32.
35 Brown, “English Heritage and Australian Culture,” 137.
content is earnestly investigated for any value that can be salvaged. Moreover, its significance as tradition is reinforced by Carey’s use of allusions to Christian imagery as narrative devices. Implicitly, this use of the tradition underscores its familiarity. The contrast in which that familiarity stands to the divisive and destructive power of Christianity as an institution, not least in a colonial context, makes Carey’s narrative use of references and allusions all the more poignant. By finding a secular use for Christian lore, Carey defuses its destructive potential and allows his readers to approach an ancient tradition of thought in a new way. In the limited space of literary works, at least, the conflict between the mythology and its political connotations can be suspended temporarily, which makes it feasible to highlight the causes of the conflict, and provides the constructive possibility of recycling and reshaping individual myths.

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Kinds of Captivity in Peter Carey’s Fiction

PETER PIERCE

IN THE AFTERWORD to his study of Peter Carey’s fiction (1994), Anthony J. Hassall contended that Carey “repeats himself less, and surprises his readers more, than any other Australian writer.”¹ The Guardian reviewer Philip Hensher concurred with Hassall, beginning his review of Carey’s fifth novel, *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), by declaring him “almost alone among contemporary novelists in never writing the same book twice.”² The three subsequent novels only reinforce this. These are the contours of Carey’s reputation: fecundity and daring formal inventiveness that find expression in a refusal to repeat the kinds of fiction that had previously won him acclaim.

Thus *Illywhacker* (1985), perhaps the finest picaresque novel written in Australia, was succeeded by the fabulous historical saga and Booker Prize winner *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). Then followed the less-praised *The Tax Inspector* (1992). Next was *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), in which Carey created nothing less than a new world-order in which the metropolitan power of Voorstand dominates other ex-colonial countries such as Efica. Carey’s long apprenticeship in his craft and the obsessions that rule his imaginative life mean that *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is instinct with echoes of his earliest collected fiction, the book of short stories titled *The Fat Man in History* (1974).

There have been three further novels: *Jack Maggs* (1997), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), and *My Life as a Fake* (2003). Each is markedly different from the others (and from what came before them) but – as will be argued later – each has a similar genesis. Their points of departure are earlier Australian texts: Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*; Ned Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter” (written in 1879; published 2002), and *The Darkening Ecliptic* (the Ern Malley poems, published as a special issue of the journal *Angry Penguins* in 1943). Together they may come to constitute Carey’s late-middle period, an investigation of kinds of captivity and escape notably different from his earlier treatment of those matters. Now their durance is as much an emotional and even moral business as it is a physical one. They may be in thrall to past obligations (as Maggs is), to a sense of wrongs done to them and to their family (Kelly), or to their own flights of the imagination (Chubb – and it must be thought – Carey himself).

From near the beginning of his career, Carey imagined his characters with such assurance that they appeared to be leading lives independent of, and indifferent to, the fictions in which they figure. We glimpse them in their grim daily tasks, eavesdropping on their conversations almost as if they were citizens of the model that Mr Gleason builds in “American Dreams.” For most of the characters in this and other stories in *The Fat Man in History*, work is bizarre, futile, horrible. The “Shepherd 3rd Class in the South Side Pavilion” supervises yet cannot prevent the drowning of horses in the pavilion’s pool. In “A Windmill in the West,” an American soldier patrols an electrified fence somewhere in outback Australia. He has been instructed that “the area to the west could be considered the United States, although, in fact, it was not.”

Imperialism, Carey suggests, whether military or cultural, operates on the basis of efficient fictions of control. In “Withdrawal,” Eddie runs a veritable little shop of horrors in the middle of respectable High Street, Armadale, in Melbourne. These occupations recall the dolls-dressmaker, the Thames corpse-collectors and the dust-heap proprietor in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*. One writer presciently sensed the increasing unreality of work in an industrializing society; the other bleakly exaggerates this unreality into the normal condition of employment in the near-contemporary world. Significantly absent from the densely created societies of Voorstand and Efica in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* are, precisely, types of conventionally productive labour. Or rather, in this post-industrial world, any work save the diversion of the masses by the theatre or the Voorstand Sirkuses is absent. Apparently labour is employed chiefly to entertain.

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One other story in *The Fat Man in History* points to this novel. This is “Report on the Shadow Industry.” The setting is California, where the latest phenomena of industrial production for mass diversion are “the shadow factories that were springing up on the west coast” (91). One quarter of household incomes are now devoted to their purchase, and the percentage increases among the poor. Whether this is for good or ill, the narrator will not decide. It may be that “the packaged shadow is necessary for mental health in an advanced technological society” (92). On the other hand, there seems to be a correlation between shadow sales and suicide rates. The Voorstand Sirkus imagined so concretely by Carey in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* will offer as engrossing an illusion for its spectators, although one rooted—in theory at least—in the ancient pieties of the Settlers Free who pioneered the country.

Another work of Carey’s affords a different perspective on this novel. His memoir of the birth of his first child, Sam (on 13 September 1986) was published in *Granta* in 1988; “A Letter to Our Son” was republished in 1994. With remarkable compression, Carey writes of falling in love with Alison Summers, who would become Sam’s mother. His prose has never been so spare yet gentle. After Summers became pregnant, Carey listened to the child’s noises in his mother’s stomach. He struggles for the right simile to transport him to a familiar, comfortable elsewhere. Thus the sound is “like soldiers marching on a bridge […]; like short-wave radio […] ; like the inside of the sea.”

The author desires such distraction because there are antenatal complications. These induce worries that he cannot share, precisely because of his vocation: “I have made a whole career out of making my anxieties get up and walk around, not only in my own mind, but in the minds of readers” (13). The act of authorial will by which, for instance, he invented the ‘Illywhacker’ Herbert Badgery, or set a glass church in motion up river in *Oscar and Lucinda*, or imagined Kelly’s impassioned testament to his daughter, is unavailing—he cannot impose his will on the birth to come, nor affect the health of either mother or child. But both live. His son is born safely, calm, with big eyes, reminding the awestruck author of generations of his ancestors on both sides of the family. The birth of Tristan Smith was no such benign outcome.

Carey had set a hazardous birth almost at the end of *The Tax Inspector*. Miraculously, Maria Takis’s child survives his basement birth with the psychopath Benny Catchprice as midwife. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* opens with the birth of its eponymous hero, once certain preliminaries concerned with the part of the world which he is entering have been completed.

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Felicity Smith, former soap-opera star and now actor-manager of the radical Feu Follett theatre in Efica’s capital, Chemin Rouge, approaches her child’s birth with a soon-to-be-reproved insouciance. Her labours begin at an ill-omened time, “at the end of a full rehearsal”\(^5\) of *Macbeth*, which centuries of superstitious actors have referred to as “the Scottish play.” The child is not expected to live long, being lipless, crippled, intestinally wrecked. Truly, to those who see him he is a monster. The boy is christened Tristan, a given name which recalls the literary arabesques of Laurence Sterne’s novel *Tristram Shandy*, besides the hero of legend and opera. In the milieu of Efica that Carey painstakingly constructs – but with such legerity – the boy has been “named after Tristan Devalier, the leader of a calamitous strike at the Imperial Dye Works in 137 EC” (28). To footnote Carey’s footnote: Efica has its own calendar, commencing from the time of its French occupation, while dye was once its economic staple.

It is hard not to feel that Carey’s anxieties before the birth of his own son have been channelled into the description of Tristan’s appearance. Most of a parent’s tormented ‘what ifs?’ receive their worst answer here (not that Tristan’s mother will behave at all despairingly). Of course, Tristan Smith is metaphorically Carey’s child. As such – but in a manner put to suggestive comic effect – he is a self-portrait as well. Like the self-confessed lair and liar Herbert Badgery, in *Illywhacker*, Tristan is given the licence to tell his own story in the first person. This is a responsibility that he discharges with much more gravity than Herbert musters. Up to the point where he escapes from Voorstand for Bergen in Norway, promising the reader that the most unusual part of his life is yet in store, much of Tristan’s story concerns the assertion of his own implacable will, in the most demoralizing of physical circumstances. Against his mother’s wishes, he intends to become an actor. Eventually, in Voorstand, he will find an unlikely role (and costume) for which he is perfectly fitted, and then a voice. Before then, he has become an author. The murder of his mother, in her last public incarnation as a candidate for political office, provokes Tristan to write “certain offensive tracts” (231). Socially outcast, he finds himself politically proscribed as well. Every author’s deep desire for an audience, and his or her dread of rejection, is dramatized in Tristan. How much of personal investment there is in this portrayal, only Carey could say.

The reader of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is more likely to be arrested first by the prodigal detail and ease with which Carey has invented the world in which his hero uncomfortably moves. The childhood memories of

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Bacchus Marsh, a town in rural Victoria recalled in *Illywhacker*, and the eccentric historical research discernible in *Oscar and Lucinda*, are not in play this time. As Coleridge put some of the most eloquent passages of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” into his prose glosses, so does Carey with the explanatory footnotes of his novel. Much more than a jest at pedantry, the footnotes allow lovely elaborations of his made-up world. Carey’s hectic narrative needs occasions to check – the reflective, delighted pause that the footnotes allow. Here are explicated legends of the Hairy Man; the sectarian disagreements over the cooking of Pigeon Patissy; the origins of the Blue (in Efica, the radical party); the use of gauge iron – what Voorstanders call galvanized iron. Another footnote explains the theory and practice of the Efican architect Belinda Burastin. Her domestic dwellings, the author wryly observes, “perfectly reflect the liberal post-colonial conundrum” (125). At once the jargon is deconstructed, in a superb flight of imagining:

> Every Burastin house carries an obvious sub-text – that it would be better for everyone if the house were not really there. Burastin’s houses barely penetrate the soil. They tiptoe on their sites. They are as light as thoughts, prayers, wishes that history had been otherwise. (125)

Those are the ‘wishes’ not only of Voorstanders for whom Efica sometimes exhibits troublesome symptoms of independence, but more importantly of the Eficans, who would rather be wholly assimilated by the dominant foreign power that heedlessly strings its top-secret military cables beneath Efican soil.

Incisively, Carey explores the paradox that captivity (on a national scale) can also be imbued with, excused by, the captivation by the dominant culture which so-called peripheral peoples both enjoy and resent. Captivity as captivation can be a personal and sexual business, too, as human transactions in many of Carey’s stories and novels attest. Essentially, though, it is a collective trauma, or act of unwelcome obeisance. As Tristan says, “We grow up with your foreignness deep inside our souls, knowing the Bruder clowns, the Bruder tales, the stories of the Saints, the history” (292).

Yet, for all the passion that Eficans may expend in learning Voorstand history and imbibing its culture, they will find – as, signally, does Tristan’s father, the actor Bill Millefleur – that they are still Outlanders. Homage to the cultural centre may bring part-time employment (Bill was the first Efican to work in a Sirkus in the Voorstand capital, Saarlim), but no permanent lodging. As Tristan, his son, sternly observes, “our circus boy would be acting out, with his own body, the surrender of our frail culture to your more powerful one” (51–52). In an interview with Robert Dessaix, Carey commented appositely on this poignant matter: “the hunger that Eficans have for Voorstand is that hunger of the historically dispossessed or transplanted for what
they feel is the real world.”

Thus part of the imaginative substance of the Efica that Carey creates is precisely a sense of its own lesser reality.

Explaining his intentions in that interview, Carey said:

> When I began the novel I had a site of action, if you like – a field of inquiry. I wanted to write about an imperialist power like America, or a reinvented America. I read part of Kafka’s *America*, because Kafka never went to America. It was wonderful, the idea of America. So I wanted to deal with that and the notion of the centre and the periphery, the large metropolitan centre and the periphery, that’s obviously my cultural and life experience.

Insofar as the macro-structure of the novel is here outlined, it looks simple. Indeed, a first reading of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* might incline one to the view that its joyous feat of detailing Efica and Voorstand is in the service of familiar, reductive polemic. The anti-Americanism of the Vietnam War era is whistled up. In Australian literature this was expressed in protest poetry, such as that collected in *We Took Their Orders and Are Dead* (1971). Problems of cultural dependence on the USA have been analysed in Frank Moorhouse’s short-story collection *The Americans, Baby* (1972) and in Thomas Keneally’s novels of World War Two on the Australian home front, *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980) and *An Angel in Australia* (2002).

Acutely aware of the anxieties which the perception of dependence creates, Carey’s treatment of them in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is complex and undogmatic. Like Millefleur, and later Tristan, he has made his home at the centre of the metropolitan power (in Carey’s case, New York), without yet feeling at ease there. This displacement fuels his understanding of Eficans’ ambivalence towards Voorstand. For instance, Vincent Theroux “wanted Efica to be free of Sirkus. But also – he loved the Sirkus” (56). Felicity Smith’s lover and political ally Theroux bankrolls the Feu Follett, many of whose productions parody the Voorstand Sirkus. As chief executive officer of Efica’s largest aspirin manufacturer, he comes closest of anyone in the novel to a job away from the footlights, although his heart is there.

Carey contextualizes the kind of diatribe, at once angry and self-pitying, that is still common currency in discussions of Australia’s cultural circumstances. Thus it is Felicity who asks:

> “Did we even begin to define a national identity? […] No one can even tell me what an Efican national identity might be. We’re northern hemisphere people who have been abandoned in the south. All we know is what we’re not.” (117)

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Yet Felicity is from Voorstand. She is assuming the right to speak of, and for, a “we” of whom, strictly speaking, she is not part; to carry the argument for Eficans in the same manner and for the same domineering reasons that she is striving to give the country a “national style in drama” (41).

Another means by which Carey complicates the exchanges between Efica and Voorstand is his technique of “placing the reader in the position of the Voorstander,” as Dessaix remarked. That is, Tristan seeks to surprise complacent and patronizing Voorstanders with a voice from the periphery that they customarily ignore. He speaks as a citizen of “a client state that made itself the servant of your country’s wishes” (311). But he does not speak in the accents of a servant, nor with a servant’s sense of his proper place. Moreover, when he arrives in Voorstand he will turn the country’s most revered traditions against it.

In the second part of the novel, Carey duplicates the exertions by which he had already created Efica. Tristan journeys to Voorstand. It is for him, as for all Eficans, the place always and intimately known, if at second-hand. Tristan’s real experience of Efica is thus both unsettling in its novelties and predictable in much that it offers him to experience. The Sirkus provides the long-awaited delights of, say, Disneyland (one of Carey’s obvious models for the Bruder Mouse and Duck figures of Voorstand folklore), while the road into the capital affords shocking images of urban decay. Carey is exploring how the dream of itself that a dominant culture fosters does not fit the reality. What Tristan finds on illegally entering Voorstand through Bruno Plasse’s tunnel is a great power rotten with superstition and neo-barbarism. The idealism with which it was founded is now reduced, as Sirkus, to garish technological images and echoes without substance or context. Frear Monroe, a celebrated Voorstand lawyer, complains that the “barbarians are not without the gates. They are within” (382).

Not that Monroe knows at the time, but an Efican has penetrated the city in the costume of a Bruder Mouse Simulacrum. This is Tristan, not Richard III or Mark Antony, whom he had dreamed of being, but a character equally subversive of political order. As Bruder Mouse, Tristan’s oracular pronouncements achieve instant celebrity, while his long-curbed sexual urges find expression with the agoraphobic millionaire, Peggy Kram, who owns five Sirkuses in Saarlim. His work done, and an assassination attempt averted, Tristan reveals himself to once-doting Voorstanders. Horrified by the transformation, they will depose that he is the Hairy Man, Dagon; the Red Saatanil. By demonizing him, they will seek to excuse their own credulity and the friability of their culture.

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This account of the last section of the novel points to formal qualities which give pause. The relish for incident that is evident in Herbert Badgery's picaresque adventures in *Illywhacker* is notable here as well. But in Tristan Smith, Carey has created a resolutely anti-picaresque protagonist. No wandering rogue, Tristan seeks the solace of the deserted Feu Follett theatre after the assassination of his mother. The pronouncements which he makes from that refuge are resolutely moralizing. It is never clear why, after a number of years, he decides to travel to Voorstand, but that obscurity of motive is one of Carey's signatures as a writer. His characters (perhaps pre-eminently Ned Kelly) arrogate to themselves the semblance of an autonomous life. Carey merely poses as our guide to the chaos in their wake and the misadventures in store for them. Thus we become used to the irregular appearances of Wally Paccione, the kindly ex-criminal and conventional circus performer (as the Human Ball) who is a surrogate father to Tristan, but the springs of his actions remain mysterious to the narrator. By sleight of hand, Carey encourages us to take them for granted as he does.

That said, Carey venturesomely undertakes so much fictional business in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* that it is not all managed to best advantage. Matters of varying significance – Wally's pigeons, the suicide of Vincent's wife, let alone the complicated affair of the involvement of Voorstand's intelligence service (the VIA) in Efican politics – receive lengthy but somewhat distracted treatment. Hensher contends that nobody goes to a novel of his "for a rational, well-directed piece of plotting" (and makes a comparison with Dickens). Moreover, Philip Hensher feels that Carey

slightly sacrifices a bit of necessary explanation in favour of a great tumult of incident, and in the end risks losing the reader's attention. Tristan himself is a moving creation, but there is not much more to him than the will to perform and a lot of medical detail: the handicap has slightly taken the place of a character.

But as Hensher generously adds, what now seem faults "might in fact be precisely what its author meant and calculated."\(^9\)

Nettled by the Australian reception of *The Tax Inspector*, Carey speculated about the 'tall poppy syndrome' in Australia. As David Williamson and Keneally could have told him, this is part of the envy culture that is evident in literary circles in his country. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* throws down a challenge. If Carey's anatomy of the extremities of suburban life in Australia in *The Tax Inspector* found only qualified favour, his next novel boldly advanced into new territory. By indirection, he presented a more comprehensive,

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compassionate and altogether unsentimental view of another colonial people. In some senses, the Eficans, “those laconic, belligerent, self-doubting inhabitants of the abandoned French and English colonies, descendants of convicts [...] grandchildren of displaced crofters and potato-blight Irish” (9), are another of Carey’s versions of the Australians.

The Eficans, whom he persuasively depicts, represent the accommodation of an imagined people to the accidents of their history (as these have been ordained by the author). They are not only what Australians might have been, but how they are – if we view their essential problems through the prism of Carey’s fiction. His intuition, one much subtler than the pictures of American influence in *The Fat Man in History*, is how dependent folk often and happily collaborate in their subjection. The condition of captivity, literal and metaphorical, may involve some clandestine coercion, but is enabled by the captivating allure (however specious, hand-me-down, two-dimensional) of the dominant culture. That is not the end of the wider story suggested by *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. The resourceful resistance of individuals to institutions which attempt to control them is epitomized by the disruption that Tristan causes in Efica. But how much change does he effect? After all, when the novel abruptly breaks off, he is in flight, penniless, accompanied by his out-of-work father and the woman, Jacqui, whom he had first known as a male nurse. In similar disarray, emigrants have often departed for distant shores. Tristan, however, is heading off uncertainly to the Old World, leaving behind a prematurely decadent New World.

It is to that Old World that *Jack Maggs* returns in hope of reunion with his ‘son’, Henry Phipps. In the trio of novels that begins with *Jack Maggs*, Carey has intensely but obliquely revisited Australia, focusing afresh on the psychologies and kinds of human captivity. Back in London, Maggs takes a situation as a footman in the house of Percy Buckle, a bookish grocer who has inherited a fortune. Next door in Great Queen Street is the house, owned secretly by Maggs, where Phipps lives – or did, until he learned of the imminent return of his benefactor. Maggs becomes an object of curiosity to the novelist Tobias Oates (in the Dickens role) who mesmerizes him, so that he knows he was “captive of someone whose powers were greater.”¹⁰ Oates asks Maggs to imagine himself in a prison where pain cannot reach him, at the same time allowing himself to explore, or burgle, “the castle of the Criminal Mind” (240). The denouement of *Jack Maggs* is formally and respectfully melodramatic: the threat of dispossession and death envelops both Maggs and

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Oates, until the former is rescued by the doughty housemaid Mercy Larkin and goes to live happily with her in Australia.

In this narrative, where past imprisonment and the threat of future durance figure so strongly, and where Oates and Maggs effectively capture each other (mesmerized, Maggs “felt himself a monkey in a sailor’s cage,” 96, but in the marshes of Gloucestershire it is Maggs who tells his tormentor that he is “bogged with me,” 219), Carey invites us to consider who is the captive, who the captor. With ingenious playfulness, Carey poses that question not only in relation to Maggs and Oates, but also to himself and Dickens, and to his novel and Dickens’s fictions. With authors and characters both, the issues are of mutual dependence, of the ambiguities of author and control. After the dream-like, truncated climax of his novel, Carey sets the old convict free, as Dickens had not, but leaves Oates forever in his thrall.

On his way to Gloucestershire to hire the Thief-taker to find Phipps, Maggs writes to the young man: “I blame myself for the way I withheld my true history from you. I left a blank map for you and you have doubtless filled it with your worst imaginings” (283–84). They are words which, it seems now, have foreknowledge of Carey’s next novel, True History of the Kelly Gang. There it is Carey who allows Kelly his own self-vindicating voice, as he bequeaths a ‘true history’ to a daughter, unknown to history. The novel won Carey his second Booker Prize (after Oscar and Lucinda). It was another of his scarcely surpassed ventriloquial feats, one to follow Herbert Badgery especially, in the buoyant belligerence of the narrative voice. Carey had dared to speak as one of Australia’s most ambivalently regarded legendary figures. Was Kelly an Irish criminal, posturer, robber and murderer? Or was he the hero of the rural poor, justified in his bloody deeds, by the police persecution of his family over decades? In his own words, he was “a widow’s son outlawed”: the novel repeats a phrase from Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter.”

Kelly’s own captive fate is signalled from the first page of the book when his mother, Mary Quinn, is described as “like a snare laid out by God for Red Kelly”11 – that is, for Ned’s hapless father. The story recounts Red’s imprisonment and his early death, the succession of charges laid against his son and other kin, Ned’s brief first spell of imprisonment in Beechworth Gaol, and then a longer one in Pentridge, Melbourne. This is, as Carey knows that everyone knows, a life that ended in captivity, with the hanging of Kelly at the Old Melbourne Gaol in November 1880. The author has enmeshed himself within one of the most familiar of tales that Australians retell, however varied and partisan their interpretations of it.

11 Carey, True History of the Kelly Gang, 5.
In this novel his risk is perhaps even greater than was the vying with Dickens in *Jack Maggs*. A national memory (which is necessarily also false consciousness) can attempt to hold him to account. The book gratefully acknowledges its sources while withholding vital information. Why did Carey put himself in thrall to this story? Why – thinking autobiographically – did a Protestant Geelong Grammar School boy insinuate himself within the mind and body of the son of an Irish convict? It is with remarkable brio, but also stamina, that the voluntary captivation of Carey by Kelly is sustained. Perhaps he feels, as Australian writers such as Eleanor Dark, “Barnard Eldershaw,” and Brian Penton dutifully did in the interwar years, that the national history was better entrusted to such saga novels as theirs than to professional historians. In any event, Carey returned wholesale to his own country in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and did so with none of the anger that his character Maggs harboured for his place of punishment. But again, in allowing himself to be captive to this potent legend of outlawry, Carey makes himself – as its chronicler – free.

There are no verbal clues in the Kelly book to the novel, *My Life as a Fake*, that followed it, as there were with *Jack Maggs*. According to interviews that Carey has given, the novel had a long gestation; there were disconcerting false starts. This time Carey was taking on not a valiant, vain, but therefore forever valued resistance to colonial authority, but a hoax that seemed to confirm the suspicion that an insecure, essentially still-colonial culture abided in Australia in the 1940s. His subject was the hoax perpetrated, of an idle afternoon in the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne in 1943, by the poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart. Dismayed by “the decay of meaning and craftsmanship in modern poetry,” the pair sought to discredit adherents of modernism, in particular Max Harris and the contributors to his magazine *Angry Penguins*. Their ruse was to invent an autodidact, working-class poet, “Ern Malley,” recently deceased, and to have his sister, Ethel, ingenuously send his poem to Harris.

The rest is disputed history. Carey feels that the immaturity of Australian culture was evidenced by the hoax and its consequences. Others have resolutely claimed that the poems were of a real quality invisible to their creators. Carey moves far away from all of this, to the extent of becoming exasperated with comments that a riff on Ern Malley was most of his fictional business. Instead, he concentrates on obsession and loneliness (perhaps two of the

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prime components of the experience of captivity). Sarah Wode–Douglass sacrifices most of her personal life to preserving the London literary journal *The Modern Review* that she edits, and lives in hope of discovering another T.S. Eliot. This leads her to Kuala Lumpur, where the Australian poet Christopher Chubb endures a lonely exile above a bicycle repair shop. It was Chubb who staged the Bob McCorkle hoax, writing the poems that conned the literary editor and modernist advocate David Weiss. Carey’s twist is to incarnate McCorkle, who appears to the cowering Chubb in a graveyard and torments him ever after, pursuing him to Malaya, stealing his daughter. McCorkle has traces of *Frankenstein*’s monster but – in the context of Carey’s work – he more closely resembles the Phantom, the ghastly gaoler whom Oates conjured up while he mesmerized *Jack Maggs*.

*My Life as a Fake* has echoes of the fantastic business of Carey’s short stories of thirty years ago. It is his funniest novel since *Illywhacker*, but also his most chilling. His territory now is mental captivity as it darkens the lives of his main characters, caught as they are in a strange dance of deception and self-deception. For them there is no escape. For their author there will no doubt be another daring flight – perhaps, as in his last three novels, into territory that we had thought we knew, but that Carey will make rich and strange.

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The Difficulties of Translating Peter Carey’s Postmodern Fiction into Popular Film

THEODORE F. SHECKELS

The term ‘postmodern,’ used heavily in the academic criticism of literature, is not necessarily a concept writers have in mind when they compose a poem or write a novel. Writers do not say to themselves “be postmodern” and proceed accordingly. Nonetheless, because writers are, to varying extents, of an age, something we might term a postmodern aesthetic is evident in their work. Some writers – Canada’s Margaret Atwood comes to mind – seem to be rather minimally reflective of this aesthetic; others, such as the American novelist Thomas Pynchon, seem almost exemplars of the postmodern. Australia’s Peter Carey, I would suggest, falls closer to the Pynchon end of this spectrum and therein lies the problem of transforming his novels into film. A postmodern film is, of course, possible, but I would suggest that both the medium and the audience’s expectations cause film to reflect more comfortably a modern or even a formal realist aesthetic. As a result, the film adaptations of Carey’s fiction seem to pull the work away from the postmodern aesthetic and, as a consequence, away from what Carey was positing through its use. The films offer something more modern or realistic, thereby confusing or altering Carey’s themes.

Defining ‘postmodern’ is, of course, a task beyond the compass of a few paragraphs in an essay. Nonetheless, I will offer an operating definition so that my discussion of Carey’s fiction and the films based on them is rooted in something more than a vague concept. Then I will proceed, case by case, through the three works of fiction thus far transformed into film: the director Brian Trenchard-Smith’s 1986 *Dead-End Drive-In*, an adaptation of a 1974 short story “Crabs”; Ray Lawrence’s 1985 *Bliss*, an adaptation of Carey’s
1981 novel; and Gillian Armstrong’s 1997 *Oscar and Lucinda*, an adaptation of Carey’s 1988 novel. My argument will be that the films do not work as Carey’s fictional works do and thereby convey different messages from those of the originals. Finally, to demonstrate that the problem is a mismatch in aesthetic assumptions, not an inherent problem with adaptations, I will consider briefly several more successful adaptations by Australian directors of Australian literary works: Bruce Beresford’s 1977 *The Getting of Wisdom*, an adaptation of Henry Handel Richardson’s 1910 novel; Gillian Armstrong’s 1979 *My Brilliant Career*, an adaptation of Miles Franklin’s 1901 novel; Igor Auzins’ 1982 *We of the Never Never*, an adaptation of Jeannie Gunn’s autobiographical account of a year in the Northern Territory; Bruce Beresford’s 1981 *Puberty Blues*, an adaptation of Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey’s accounts of life as teenage girls in the Sydney suburbs; and Ken Cameron’s 1982 *Monkey Grip*, an adaptation of Helen Garner’s quasi-autobiographical 1977 novel. These works of ‘fiction’ do not, or do not significantly, reflect the postmodern aesthetic. As a result, directors and screenplay writers were able to effect the transition to film far more smoothly.

The Postmodern

I would suggest that a postmodern aesthetic has five characteristics. Although each is rich in implications and therefore cannot be captured in a phrase or a sentence, I will attempt to do just that, in order to be able to use these five traits with a degree of facility in assessing Australian fiction and film.

First, the postmodern continues the modern’s experimentation with forms. Traditional forms, especially those associated with formal realism, are still avoided. However, rather than construct forms that have an order—even an intricate order—of their own, the postmodern often denies order, whether it be the supposed order of the universe or the human-imposed order of the artifact. Art no longer provides a retreat from fragmentation; rather, it mirrors that fragmentation. The postmodern, somewhat ironically, revives the mimetic assumption the modern rejected but only to emphasize how that assumption was misused by the realist. Genuine mimesis reflects a philosophical void, not definable realities.

Second, the postmodern enhances the modern rejection of history as continuous narrative. Placing a story in time, not especially important to the mod-

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ern, becomes philosophically objectionable to the postmodern. Temporal order is to be eschewed because of the illusions of continuity and cause-and-effect relationships that it creates.

Third, the postmodern rejects geographical specificity just as it rejects temporal specificity. The postmodern acts as if physical setting, a central element in formal realism, were trivial. The boundaries that separate one place from another are arbitrary, and, although differences in language can make the places seem so different, the cultural and philosophical differences are minor. There are, of course, differences separating one group from another. Meaningful boundaries exist along class or racial lines, so these are often evident; but an oppressive nation is an oppressive nation, a colonized land a colonized land, and a materialistic society a materialistic society. Thus, for example, in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) the setting is not South Africa, but neither is it any other place in particular. Rather, the setting is a conquered and controlled land, and the dynamics of the story are those of victimization and futile retribution. These dynamics are, of course, applicable to Coetzee’s South Africa, but also to many other places in many other times.

Fourth, the postmodern privileges a hero who is, typically, an alienated, asocial individual. The alienation goes deep, and there is a strong suggestion that there is really nothing to associate with, even should one desire to. The hero, then, looks inward because his or her ‘world’ is all that has meaning. Action can give the hero identity and meaning beyond the self; however, these are transient: once action ceases, the hero is once again trapped in solipsism. This hero is not different in kind from that of the modern, but is so in degree. That difference often shows up in the work’s resolution: whereas the modern hero often ends his or her story unsettled, the postmodern hero ends without even the terms of a possible resolution being clear.

Fifth and finally, the postmodern eschews both supposedly realistic stories and less realistic mythologies for explorations of aesthetic surfaces. Stories and mythologies do not disappear; however, they are subordinated to play. Because the writer must play in a verbal medium – or twist that medium so that it becomes more visual or aural, the aesthetic surfaces the writer creates tend to be verbally dense. The ‘tone’ of these explorations is often not the rapture of the modern ‘art for art’s sake’ but, rather, a desperation inspired by the feeling that the artist must either play or become lost in a void.

Film can exhibit these five characteristics and thereby be postmodern. Two factors, however, inhibit postmodern filmmaking. First, because film is primarily a visual medium, specificity of time and place are difficult to avoid. Film’s being primarily visual (and secondarily aural) also means that the medium is inconsistent with purely verbal play. Second, because mainstream film audiences come to the movie-theatre with expectations about both genre and hero-
ism, departure from norms rooted in an earlier era become problematic for the filmmaker. To the extent that these two factors can be overcome, a film could be postmodern. However, the filmmaker would be going against the grain of the medium and running the risk of losing his or her audience. An experimental filmmaker creating a low-budget piece for festival exhibition might do so, but Carey’s novels were not in the hands of such filmmakers. They were mainstream enough for the constraints of medium and audience to matter.

Film Adaptations of Carey’s Fiction

“Crabs” and Dead-End Drive-In
Carey’s short story “Crabs” is set in what we assume is Australia. A few word-choices root the story in a place, but, for the most part, the text is devoid of geographical clues. It is an urban place; it is a drive-in movie theatre in an urban location. There are cars a-plenty – most of U.S. manufacture. When these automobiles are dated, they are dated from the 1950s. But they are often treated as if prized relics, so the story’s time must be some point well after the 1950s. The warfare that is raging outside the drive-in between the “Karboys” and the tow-truck operators suggests that anarchy, not order, characterizes the story’s time. So does the government’s policy of controlling the population by imprisoning many within drive-in cinemas. Since neither anarchy nor oppressive government regulation are a reality (yet), readers project the story’s time into the future: the story depicts the anarchy and oppression that are to come. However, there is very little in the text to suggest what that time might be. Both place and time are largely indeterminate.

The story’s premise – that drive-in theatres have become prisons – is absurd. Other elements in the story are garishly exaggerated. We are not dealing with formal realism but, rather, with some kind of fantasy. In a context defined in succeeding years by George Miller’s Mad Max (1979) and Mad Max II (1981), it is not surprising that readers in the decade following the story’s composition found something of the speculative fiction genre in “Crabs.” However, rather than projecting current trends into a future, Carey seems to be simply exaggerating them in order to satirize them. Thus, “Crabs” features characters with an exaggerated focus on the superficial as well as characters with an exaggerated fascination with cars. More seriously, “Crabs” depicts a latent racism that surfaces when the authorities move large numbers of darker skinned ‘in-mates’ into the drive-in. One might associate these satirical targets with Australia: the racism, for example, suggests the ‘White Australia’ movement of the 1930s as well as more recent backlashes against government policies that encourage immigration from Asia. However, super-
ficiality, an obsession with fast vehicles, and latent racism are hardly unique to Australia. Carey’s satire seems to target the excesses and the prejudices of several affluent societies, including the USA and Great Britain, while offering a particularly telling indictment of Australia.

The story’s hero, Crabs himself, is “too small” to be a tow-truck driver like his brother. He aspires to the fraternity of such drivers, but remains alienated from it. He surrenders his new running shoes to bullying Karboys; he allows himself to be seen driving a wimpy pizza delivery van. Not fitting into the macho society the story depicts, he withdraws into his dreams of bulking-up and becoming a tow-truck driver; meanwhile, to make at least some of these dreams come true, he borrows his brother’s prized car to impress his girlfriend Carmen. When he, Carmen, and the car become trapped in the Star Drive-in, he desperately tries to get out. Initially, his fear that his brother will kill him pushes him onward; then he seems to embrace the role of escapee, to find in it an identity far more self-satisfying than “wimp.” Unfortunately, even though Crabs enacts an escape by becoming – in his mind – a car and hurling the drive-in’s fences, he finds the identity transient, for, after driving at a screeching speed through the eerily empty suburbs, he finds himself still within the fences even though he had earlier soared over them.

It is not surprising that the film-rights to this particular story proved marketable: the story presents a visual feast. Words evoke the visual, marking the story as a postmodern tale that might well be transformed into a more visual medium. “Crabs” also seems not so removed from reality as it plays with words and the visual images they evoke. Carey’s evident desire to satirize keeps his story somewhat rooted in the reality he will target and exaggerate. “Crabs,” then, is not so postmodern on this last count as other works of fiction from the same period. He delights in creating absurdities through his words, but not so much that they cannot be visually rendered to seem minimally probable. Consider, for example, Pynchon’s not dissimilar *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). It is visual; it is satiric; but it is absurd to the point that ‘literalizing’ the visual images Pynchon’s words evoke would be laughable.

So, Carey’s words can be translated into viable visual images. Carey’s story is not *too* postmodern. The story’s indeterminate place and time are handled fairly well by Trenchard–Smith. The place is clearly metropolitan Sydney, but that place is not stressed. The time is, as in the story, hard to pin down. The cars are of various vintages. The characters’ attire mix 1950s and punk and just plain bizarre in such a way that motion-picture viewers do not know when the story takes place. Although place and time are necessarily more defined in the film than in the story, they are nonetheless vague.

Movie viewers may be tolerant of temporal or geographical indeterminacy, but not of generic confusion. The film thus crams Carey’s experimental fan-
tasy-satire into more familiar motion-picture genres. Perhaps the filmmakers were trying to preserve the story’s postmodern ‘feel’ by evoking and parodying several such genres simultaneously – by creating a multiply parodic feast rather than a genre-avoiding fantasy. Whether they were or not, they certainly did mix science fiction, horror, teen, and escape genres all in one film. Insofar as \textit{Dead-End Drive-In} seems to depict a future world where car mania is raging, anarchy is growing, and the government is increasingly oppressive, the film is ‘classic’ science-fiction. As such, it warns against these present trends. Insofar as something mysterious attacks the car while Crabs and Carmen make love, the film is ‘classic’ shlock-horror. It is especially like horror films, such as the multiple \textit{Friday the Thirteenth} films, in which teenagers – usually over-sexed teenagers – are the victims. Insofar as \textit{Dead-End Drive-In} presents oppressive but incompetent adults and rebellious teenagers, it is ‘classic’ teen movie. In order to be such, the screenplay writers make an interesting change in the story – the drive-in’s ‘prisoners’ are of all ages, whereas in the film the ‘in-mates’ are all young people such as Crabs and Carmen. Insofar as Crabs plans and executes his escape from the drive-in, the film is ‘classic’ escape movie. In such films, the escape is almost always successful, and in \textit{Dead-End Drive-In}, it is. This ‘happy’ ending is another departure the screenplay writers made. Perhaps, in Crabs’ mania as he speeds along the highway, the viewer is supposed to detect at least the emptiness of his escape, but it is doubtful that many viewers saw it as anything other than formulaic. Filmgoers, especially those with a taste for mainstream motion pictures, process their fare in generic terms. Although the postmodern writer may eschew defined genres and experiment, the filmmaker may not have the freedom of the writer to avoid the generic structures that facilitate the audience’s ‘reading’ (and enjoyment) of a film.

Similarly, film viewers want a hero. This hero can be alienated, and this hero can be asocial. However, this hero needs to achieve a degree of success – that is, if the film is to be a mainstream success. Thus, the Crabs of Carey’s story, who inexplicably ends up trapped within the fences of the drive-in despite his dramatic flight over them, becomes the Crabs of \textit{Dead-End Drive-In}, who does indeed gain freedom. He is alone in his freedom; he is heading back to Sydney and the budding anarchy there. So, that freedom is qualified – if one chooses to think about it. But he does he win – having conquered the ‘evil’ government and the inept but repressive adults who serve it.

\textit{Dead-End Drive-In} is not a bad movie. It is skilfully filmed and its roles are reasonably well performed by actors and actresses who enact stereotypes with an edge, an edge that makes the filmgoer aware that, on one level, the movie is a send-up. The way the film plays with several popular genres is also interesting, although this postmodern touch might escape many moviegoers’
notice. However, despite these good or interesting qualities, *Dead-End Drive-In* is not Peter Carey’s “Crabs.” “Crabs” is satirical; the film only occasionally so – when it, almost incidentally, brings in some element of the story. “Crabs” is about futile heroism in a world without any real meaning; the film is about successful heroism, where the hero overcomes an ‘evil’ world and re-enters one that viewers conveniently forget had its troubles, too. “Crabs” is not set firmly in a time or a place. It is, therefore, a fantasy, free to have its fun and sound its satirical notes without any single referent. The film is much more set, hence seems to be tied to a near-future Australia. Some of the story’s satirical thrust is lost as a result.

**Bliss**

Carey’s 1981 novel *Bliss* is presumably set in Australia in the 1960s or 1970s, the decades before the book was composed. Precise dating is difficult, as is precise locating, for there are only a few clues that point to the Australian setting. The many references to the USA, as well as some British slang, might mislead readers into placing the story somewhere other than Australia. And I would suggest that this vagueness is deliberate, for what the novel depicts is a business world that has become amoral if not immoral. Carey wishes to suggest that this lack of morality is not exclusively Australian; rather, it is characteristic of the industrialized world during the several post-World War II decades. Carey wishes to depict this, to show how it creeps into other realms of human existence and pollutes them, and to posit an alternative. That alternative, an ecotopia presided over by Honey Barbara, must have a setting as well. If we imagine the book’s polluted wasteland to be New South Wales, then the ecotopia must be somewhere up in Queensland. Carey, however, gives us few clues beyond naming some flora and fauna. If the wasteland is left largely indeterminate, the redeeming alternative is even more so. The result is that readers are left to wonder how viable an alternative the ecotopia is.

Of course, the whole story could be Harry Joy’s dream. We are told that he has a heart attack and lies, as if dead, on the front lawn of his suburban home. He revives, and the novel’s story is the rest of his life. However, the novel’s story could just as easily be what he imagines during the time he lingers between life and death, with Honey Barbara and her ecotopia as the heaven Harry envisions himself entering. That one could plausibly read the novel in this way suggests how un-rooted the plot is in any particular place or time.

Carey enjoys playing in *Bliss* – playing with form, playing with language. Events are absurd, as are characters. Formal realism has been left behind, yielding to magical realism or surrealism or fantasy. (That the precise term for Carey’s mode of fiction is difficult to determine is in itself suggestive of how
The industrialized world is satirized – its corrupt business practices; its reliance on the empty glitz of the advertising agency. This satire, however, does not overpower the fantasy that Carey creates for the joy of creating absurd characters and absurd events.

The novel’s absurdities are, of course, created through words, and these words do evoke a visual image. However, that visual image is very much left partly unformed by Carey. It is never literally before our eyes. Thus, we see, but do not really see, Harry Joy’s teenage son – sometimes imagined by Harry to be dressed as a Nazi officer – compelling his innocent-looking younger sister Lucy to perform fellatio on him in exchange for the drugs she seeks. Similarly, we imagine that Harry sees fish pouring out of his unfaithful wife’s vagina without having literally to see the fish pouring out onto the floor. Carey’s words evoke pictures, but these pictures are not given a starkly literal rendering by our minds as we read on.

Harry sees the world for the polluted place it has become. Can he defeat this world? Can he successfully escape it for a better place? These are the questions that drive the plot of Bliss. The answers are necessarily complicated by the fact that we are not entirely sure how much of the story is to be considered as being within Harry’s mind and how much is to be understood by the reader as ‘really’ occurring. Assuming that at least a fair amount of the plot is outside Harry Joy’s head, we can answer the questions with only weak affirmations. The corrupt world is exposed and defeated, but the exposure and defeat occur more by accident than by Harry’s intervention. He is not an especially effective actor in the world, and, when he does act, his actions often run counter to his goals. He chooses, for example, to strike a business deal with his estranged wife and thereby loses the love of Honey Barbara. We imagine that through years of tending the bees and trees in her ecotopia he regains that love. We know at least that he has two children with her, since we find out in the end that they are the novel’s narrators. But, as is typical of Carey, he takes away as he gives. Their existence proves Harry’s ultimate redemption, but their being the narrators from the perspective of years later gives the entire story the quality of legend. Legends are notoriously embellished as they are passed along. Thus, Harry’s triumphs become questionable.

Carey himself played a role in transforming the novel into a film: he worked on the screenplay, and, thus, one can assume that there will not be the distortions here that we found in the case of “Crabs” and Dead-End Drive-In. And there are indeed no similar distortions. However, Carey himself encoun-

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tered difficulties moving from one medium to another, from the fiction medium that allowed his postmodern text to the film medium that resisted it.

Place and time are not as vague in the film as in the book. Viewers are rather clearly taken to Australia, and such things as automobiles, clothing styles, and even office decor fix the events within a relatively narrow time-range. Honey Barbara’s ecotopia, although not pinpointed, is clearly tropical, and the distance Harry must travel to get there seems rather close to that between Sydney and Daintree. The effect of this higher level of specificity in the film is twofold. First, it weakens the satire, making it seem largely applicable to Australia. Second, it makes the escape from the corrupt, morally polluted world seem more plausible, for we literally see the ecotopia.

Literalizing the fantastic and the absurd is the film’s overall problem. Placing images in the mind through the evocative power of words is one thing; placing literal images on the big screen another. Sometimes, the transformation works fairly well – for example, the scene where Bettina Joy immolates herself. At other times, not so well – for example, the scenes mentioned earlier where Nazi-clad David Joy forces his little sister to fellate him and where fish – literal fish – pour forth from Bettina’s crotch. The scenes in the hospital also fall flat in the film, and Honey Barbara, very much an erotic idea in the novel, becomes too much of an erotic reality in the film. The film also cannot decide whether she is victim or hero. The novel sustains the ambiguity because we do not have to shift from literally seeing her face as pathetic to literally seeing her face as coolly controlling.

Seeing both Honey Barbara and Harry Joy in the ecotopia also compels the viewer to determine whether Harry has succeeded in triumphing – personally – over the forces of evil that he found controlling the city. The visual images, the camera angles, the use of lighting, and the music all lead one to believe that he has. Doubt is minimal. Even more minimal in the viewer’s thoughts is the possibility that all of this is but Harry Joy’s dream. The viewer grants Harry’s triumph because of how it is presented visually. The viewer does this so readily because the triumphant hero, even if he is a very alienated one, matches up with the genre expectations that are brought to the movie-theatre. In popular films, problems are solved, evil is defeated, escapes are successful. To pull moviegoers away from these assumptions in a more postmodern direction requires a considerable effort, one that might disorient to the point that the motion picture fails to please and fails to attract much of an audience. As Brian McFarlane has noted in his *Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film* (1983), the need to satisfy the mainstream audience was more of a
problem for Australian filmmakers than filmmakers elsewhere because of the relatively small size of the Australian market.\(^4\)

*Bliss* the novel and *Bliss* the film are not so different from each other as “Crabs” and *Dead-End Drive-In* are. Probably because Carey was involved in the making of the film *Bliss*, it remains partly true to the text. However, the film is stark where the novel is both vague and suggestive. This starkness gives the film a more optimistic feel than the book; it also creates moments where one cringes at what one is literally seeing. Further, the film is definite where the novel is ambiguous, giving the film an Australian meaning somewhat at the expense of the more global satire delivered by the novel. *Bliss* the film, then, lacks the richness of the book, a richness rooted to a considerable extent in the novel’s postmodern qualities.

**Oscar and Lucinda**

There are historical novels and historical novels. Avoiding Australia for the moment, I would like to consider two books set in the late seventeenth century, Kathleen Winsor’s notorious *Forever Amber* (1944) and John Barth’s hilarious *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1967). Winsor’s book is a period piece: it takes its reader back to the reign of Charles II, immerses the reader in the period, and assumes that this reader will enjoy experiencing an earlier time vicariously through fiction. Barth’s novel, by contrast, is the work of a self-confessed fabulator. Barth creates both an England and a Maryland out of some facts and a great deal of artistic licence. He thereby immerses the reader in a world that he has created, which bears a resemblance to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries but is not them. Barth wants the reader to enjoy something, but not an earlier time period; Barth wants the reader to enjoy the artifact. Winsor’s novel, then, is an historical novel in the tradition of formal realism; Barth’s a novel in the tradition of postmodernism.

Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* is of the latter sort. Unlike “Crabs” and *Bliss*, *Oscar and Lucinda* is full of place-names and dates. We can place the events of the novel on a map, and we know approximately when in the course of human events they supposedly took place. But this level of specificity might be misleading. Are we to imagine that the places in the novel, described in some detail, are what one would have literally found back then? Or are we to assume that Carey has used his imagination to create what these places might have been like? The latter seems more likely to have been the case. History and a limited amount of geographical knowledge provided the author with –

to use a reviewer’s apt metaphor – a scaffolding upon which he hung invented tapestries of an imagined world a century earlier.

Into this world Carey placed a story about eccentrics. Although a great deal of Carey’s energy is spent exploring what makes these people tick, the novel ends up being a romance between the eccentric Oscar, who – despite being a minister – is obsessed with gambling, and the eccentric Lucinda, who – despite being a woman in an age when men dominated business – is obsessed with glass, its manufacture, and the artistry possible with it. Just as Oscar and Lucinda seem to be out of kilter with their socially assigned roles, the novel’s plot seems out of kilter with the normal trajectory of a romance. A bet between the two and Oscar’s quest to bring a glass church overland to where Lucinda’s supposed lover has established an outback parish dominate the plot of the last third of the book – to the point where a reader can easily forget that there seems to be an incipient love-relationship between the title characters. The book, then, does not stay nailed down as one kind of a novel or another. It moves freely among types. It is eccentric, much as the title characters are.

These two characters are certainly likeable. Nonetheless, they are alienated from the society they live in, alienated because of their obsessions. They both, in fact, seem adrift except when they are pursuing those obsessions. Gambling gives Oscar life; glass gives Lucinda life. When they are acting in accord with these obsessions, they are defined. So action gives them meaning in life. That meaning is as fragile as the glass Lucinda worships – not to mention the glass church Oscar tries to bring into the Australian outback.

The plot is in many ways absurd. It is also rather spare for a novel the length of Oscar and Lucinda. The delight one takes in reading Carey’s work is thus not entirely derived from the twists and turns of plot. One delights in the world Carey fabricates out of words: the scenes those words create; the conversations those words constitute.

Gillian Armstrong’s film version also has its delights: those of a period piece and of a romance. As a period piece, it has temporal and geographic specificity. We feel we are transported from nineteenth-century England to nineteenth-century Australia. We do not inhabit a fabulated scene as we watch the film; rather, we witness what we presume once really was.

Just as Armstrong – and presumably the screenplay writer, Laura Jones – yields to the audience’s expectations of a period piece, so the director yields to its expectations of a romance. Although the characters’ eccentricities are on display and their obsessions clear, as the film progresses, these fade into the background and the love story between Oscar and Lucinda takes over. It is far more dominant in the film than in the book. This film-genre, the romance, does not require a happily-ever-after ending: viewers today are sufficiently cynical that they accept love’s futility. But the utter futility of the novel,
which sees both title characters suffer an adverse fate, is avoided in the movie, where the ending is predictably softened, not only by Lucinda’s survival, as in the book, but also by the preservation of her fortune. Carey does offer readers a quick glimpse into Lucinda’s future, described as “long and fruitful”; he tells his readers that they ‘could’ interpret the novel’s ending through the lens of this future. However, Carey quickly undermines this positive possibility by describing how Lucinda feels as the events of the novel conclude. Armstrong retreats from the book’s qualified pessimism, perhaps because her mainstream audience was not likely to be quite so cynical as Carey’s postmodern text.

Lucinda’s ultimate prosperity in the film version deflects attention from the obsession that gives her life meaning to the ways one might, in the real world, grow out of such obsessions. In Armstrong’s film, the meaning of her life resides not so much in action as in growth. Oscar becomes the hero who quests successfully, although not benefitting personally from that success. He joins a long roster of movie- and book-heroes whose lives find meaning because they have served and benefitted others. A gambler he is, but that is not the essence of Oscar’s character in the film. In the film, he is a lover who becomes a hero because he serves that love. Oscar’s character acquires a certain dynamism, as does Lucinda’s: she develops beyond obsession; he develops because love supplants his obsession. In Carey’s novel, the characters are their obsessions; in the film, their obsessions are a point beyond which each meaningfully progresses. The film, then, tells a different story about the central characters, even though most of the novel’s plot remains unaltered.

Armstrong, I would suggest, knew she had a story that could have become maudlin. And she stops short of the sentimental touches that would have pushed the narrative in that direction. Nonetheless, the audience’s delight is in the sentimental touches, even though the film does not lay these on thickly. The delight is not in the fabricated world before the eyes of the viewer; rather, it is in the story, as it usually is in the popular film genre.

Other Adaptations

Adapting novels into films is common, in Australia as elsewhere. And, as George Bluestone noted almost a half century ago, adapting is often problematic. The difficulties can be rooted in differences in media or audience. A director can, however, overcome those obstacles and create a film version of a novel that is reasonably true to the original. As discussed in the previous section, Carey’s postmodern aesthetic, however, makes it difficult for film-

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Translating Carey’s Postmodernist Fiction into Film

makers to do this. More successful adaptations of novels that are arguably more modern or more formally realistic illustrate this point.

Henry Handel Richardson’s *The Getting of Wisdom* is a classic early-twentieth-century Australian novel. As such, it is, not surprisingly, an example of formal realism. Bruce Beresford’s film adaptation captures the novel fairly well. Since the book is firmly set in time and place, Beresford has only research to do to get the look of rural and urban Victoria ‘right’. He can make choices about how to portray the central character, but the form of the movie will be in line with the *Bildungsroman* genre of the book. Beresford can choose how much salience to give to the film’s social class and proto-feminist commentary, but the storyline of a rebellious, talented young girl from the outback is so ‘set’ that he cannot experiment here. Furthermore, the terms of this young girl’s heroism are also fairly ‘set’: she will be celebrated for her individualism and her talent. As she triumphs in the novel, so she triumphs in the film. We will see the triumph on the screen, and what we see will be the emotional equivalent of what we might have read in the book.

Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* (1901) is another Australian ‘classic’. Like *The Getting of Wisdom*, it was published under a male pseudonym by a young Australian woman. Gillian Armstrong’s task in adapting it was quite similar to Beresford’s. The novel’s formal realism gave the director her setting; its genre gave her both heroine and generic characteristics. The task was to capture the book, not play with the filmmaker’s art and create a motion picture. There were many problems along the way as *My Brilliant Career* was being filmed – for example, finding a new lead actress shortly before going into production. The most striking problem was experienced by the screenplay writers. They seem to have argued over how much to update the novel’s ideology for its 1979 audience. As was the case with Beresford’s *The Getting of Wisdom*, there was not much else to argue about: the novel very easily made its way from book to film because of its aesthetic.

Igor Auzins’ *We of the Never Never* is another ‘period piece’. It adapts Jeannie Gunn’s memoirs about her year on a station in the Northern Territory into a poignant but rather slow-moving film. There is no question about the setting: Auzins’ job is simply to get it ‘right’. He was not as constrained by genre as Beresford and Armstrong were. Nonetheless, he takes his lead from the memoirs and has the film show the events of the year from Jeannie’s point of view. Thus, we see her partly overcome the anti-feminist attitudes of the station-hands, confront the horrible realities of Aboriginal life, and deal with her husband Aeneas’s illness and death. As she experiences in the book, so

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7 Eleanor Whitcombe received credit for the screenplay, but the producer Margaret Fink played a significant role in its composition and revision.
she experiences in the film. The film thus ‘captures’ the book rather well because the film medium works well with the book’s realistic aesthetic.

One might think, based on these three examples, that period pieces have the edge when it comes to ‘accurate’ adaptation. Two much more contemporary works of fiction, however, demonstrate that it is not a question of period setting but, rather, of aesthetic.

In 1978, two Sydney schoolgirls, assisted by their creative-writing teacher, wrote *Puberty Blues*. In a series of vignettes, the girls revealed what it was like to be growing up female in the oceanfront suburbs of Sydney. The girls depicted in the book were young teenagers, so the heavy doses of alcohol, drugs, and sex came as quite a jolt to Australian readers. Bruce Beresford’s adaptation of the book depicts the scene as vividly as did the original; it also does not hold back when it comes to alcohol, drugs, and sex. Because Beresford and producers Margaret Kelly and Joan Long thought that young teenagers ought to see the film, they did, however, make a few alterations. They decided to interject more humour into the film than was in the book, believing teenagers would choose to skip a film that was felt to be too preachy. Furthermore, they raised the age of the girls and carefully filmed sex scenes, trying to avoid a rating that would, by law, exclude these young viewers. 8 These changes aside, Beresford follows the book closely, focusing on young Debbie’s entry into the surfing culture and, then, her heroic rejection of its excesses and its sexism. In book and film alike, a strong moral trajectory is superimposed upon *Bildungsroman* to give the audience a familiar story structure. The one problem Beresford had adapting book to film is instructive. In his desire for authenticity, he had the teenage girls wear the very abbreviated bikinis they would have worn at the time. Beresford thereby set himself up for criticism: he was, according to some, supporting the sexism the book denounced. What Beresford was really doing was taking something benign in print and, by making it visual, inadvertently changing audience reaction. Beresford’s problem was especially noticeable in the film’s ending, where Debbie and friend Sue buy a surfboard, leave the passively sunbathing ‘surfie chicks’ on the beach, and enter the male-dominated surf. Beresford sets up a triumphal conclusion to Debbie’s story but allows the highly sexualized visual depiction of the surfing girls to contradict their victory over the oppressive sexist youth culture the book and film present.

There is a modern looseness to *Puberty Blues* the book. The authors may have been experimenting with form, as does the Canadian Alice Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), or, maybe, they just were not accomplished

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writers yet and the looseness of form was an accident, not an experiment. Much more conscious looseness is evident in *Monkey Grip* (1977). In her novel, set in Melbourne’s Carlton and Fitzroy districts, Helen Garner may be using the fragmentary nature of her narrative to mirror the fragmentary existence of Nora, her central female character. Ken Cameron’s film adaptation captures that fragmentation by frequently jump-cutting from scene to scene, giving the film, at moments, a cinéma-vérité quality. In keeping with that artistic goal, Cameron offers a highly realistic picture of Melbourne life during the 1970s (although Garner herself thought Cameron’s picture was too pretty and others thought it a tad anachronistic, with early 1970s lifestyles plopped down in the very early 1980s). The novel is full of references to streets and places that one who knows Melbourne not all that well could easily pinpoint; the novel is also full of descriptions of these city scenes, especially the houses in which Nora and her friends and lovers live. Through words, Garner gives us a realistic time and place; through visual images, Cameron does the same.

*Monkey Grip*, book and film, is about addiction – Javo’s to drugs, Nora’s to Javo. As a story about addiction, the novel, not surprisingly, proceeds like a roller-coaster, with ups and downs as the two characters try to escape what imprisons them. There is no dominant genre, although the structure is not difficult for the reader to follow. The film pursues a similar course. Although the film has a fragmented feel – partly the result of editing – the viewer stays on course because Nora is central throughout, almost always on the screen. In Garner’s novel, addiction proves powerful: the central characters do not triumph. At best, they move on, having been scarred but also having – maybe – learned from the experiences the novel presents. They are not victors, but they are not exactly victims either. They drift out of the book, their fates not determined. This indeterminacy is less striking in Cameron’s film, however. There, Nora is given a last scene where she chooses what is best for herself and her daughter Gracie. There, she realizes that she has responsibilities in life and, a little too suddenly, matures. Cameron thus yields to the popular film audience’s expectations and desires. He has Nora grow up a bit more than in Garner’s novel: the generic expectations of the ‘growing-up’ film are met, as is the audience’s desire for a hero who, even if alienated, moves in a positive direction in the end. Perhaps in accord with this slight change in the story’s resolution are two other changes evident in Cameron’s depiction of Nora: she is not a drug-user as she is in the book; nor is she as promiscuous. If Cameron wants to give the audience more hope for Nora than Garner does, these changes would help. However, it is also possible that Cameron was trying to simplify the story, save money on the number of performers, and avoid making a film that was
quite as scandalous as the novel.\footnote{For a discussion of the scandal the novel caused, see Bronwyn Levy, “Women and the Literary Pages: Some Recent Examples,” \textit{Hecate} 11.1 (1985): 4–11.} These changes – and others – disturb the critic Cath Darcy, who sees the film as a “watered-down version” of the book.\footnote{Cath Darcy, “‘Just Another Love Story’: \textit{Monkey Grip} on the Screen,” \textit{Antipodes} 13.2 (1999): 95–99.} I would argue, however, that despite them, Cameron does give viewers the essence of Garner’s book – the drugs, the sex, the music, the fragmentation and alienation. He also offers viewers a glimpse of the Carlton and Fitzroy districts of Melbourne in the 1970s, just as Garner does in her novel.

Different Aesthetics

The directors of these five films, three examples of period pieces and two of contemporary social realism, created motion pictures that differed from the novels they were based on. That goes without saying: because the media are different, film and novel will never be identical. However, these directors came close to representing in their different medium the novelists’ works. They updated an idea; they muted the sensationalistic; they tweaked the ending because they knew their motion-picture audiences wanted more hope than the novels perhaps provided. But despite their updating, muting, and tweaking, they offered films that we might say are fairly ‘true’ to their fiction sources. They were aided considerably in doing so by the fact that these sources reflected a formal realist or modernist aesthetic.

The problem with the film adaptations of Peter Carey’s fiction is that the latter reflects a different, postmodern, aesthetic. Because of its formal experimentation; its indeterminate temporal and geographical setting; its alienated, solipsistic hero who ‘is’ only so long as he or she acts; and its verbal play, Carey’s fiction does not move smoothly from text to screen. Film’s visual medium resists indeterminacy and requires that the play at least shifts from word to image and sound. Film’s typical audience resists structures that are dissonant with customary genres and resists heroes who do not on at least a few counts conform to motion-picture norms. Both the medium and the audience pose difficulties for a screenplay writer or a director who is attempting to bring Carey’s fiction to the screen.

Fiction has proven to be a remarkably flexible literary ‘form’. It worked with the moral aesthetic that characterized much literature prior to the eighteenth century: whether in verse or in prose, it afforded writers a means to tell a fable featuring types and offering a moral lesson. Fiction worked with the formal realistic aesthetic that began to emerge in the eighteenth century and
prevailed in different guises into the twentieth. Fiction and this aesthetic seemed, in fact, made for each other. Fiction has also worked with the more experimental modern aesthetic and the de-emphasized settings and somewhat alienated characters who populated the stories that reflected this aesthetic. Fiction has, finally, worked with the much more indeterminate, much more alienated, and somewhat more verbally playful postmodern aesthetic. On the other hand, film – at least mainstream film – seems stuck between the formal realistic aesthetic and the modern aesthetic. If film tilts too much in the one direction, it is stodgy; if too much in the other, it is avant-garde and in danger of losing the mass audience it needs to cover costs. Stuck as it is, film is not proving as flexible a ‘form’ as fiction. Oddly, in the directing and production techniques evident in popular music videos, there are – I would suggest – some hints as to how film might modify itself to work in concert with the postmodern aesthetic. Whether film, the dominant mass ‘literary’ form of our time, does transform itself so as to match up better with the postmodern aesthetic reflected in many ‘elite’ or ‘high-cultural’ (as opposed to ‘popular’) texts is, of course, something that will only be known decades from now. In the meantime, postmodern writers like Peter Carey face problems such as those evident in the film versions of “Crabs,” Bliss, and Oscar and Lucinda. Interesting movies might well be based on postmodern works, but they will probably lose some significant dimension of the source. Put another way, the delightful fabulation of Illywhacker or the surreal absurdities and grotesqueries of The Tax Inspector are not likely to make it to the screen. What readers enjoy as they read these books would probably get lost in the translation to film because Carey’s fiction is reflective of a postmodern aesthetic but film is stuck serving different ones.

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“A Dazzled Eye”

“Kristu-Du” and the Architecture of Tyranny

NICHOLAS BIRNS

an accursed thing it is to gaze
On prosperous tyrants with a dazzled eye

Peter Carey’s early short story “Kristu-Du” concerns a Western architect, Gerrard Haflinger. Haflinger is designing a building in what would then have been called a ‘Third-World’ country. The country is ruled by a vicious dictator, Oongala. The architect, defying the uneasiness of his wife and the prompting of his conscience, stays on to finish and implement the design of his building. He thinks that it is going to be the ultimate socially conscientious act. His building, the Kristu-Du, is described in the most utopian terms possible:

It had been designed to the brief of Oongala’s first victim, the late president, as a unifying symbol for the eight tribes, sited in the holiest place, a neutral ground where a new democracy would start to spread its fragile wings. Gerrard, in the early days when the plan had been selected, had spoken of its function with a fierce obsessive poetry, likening it to a vast machine which would take an active role in the birth of a new democracy. It was not a symbol, he said. It was not a building. It was one of those rare pieces of architecture which would act on the future as well as exist in the present.

The determining situation in the story, what makes Gerrard Haflinger’s dream go so terribly awry, is political repression. Yet the story has been more frequently read as a parable of pride and the nemesis thereof, rather than as a narrative embedded in concrete political circumstances of both setting and production. This is a general tendency in critical discourse on Carey. This tendency neglects one of the most compelling aspects of his large and impressive oeuvre. One could say, aphoristically, that too many critics have seen Borges in Carey, and not enough García Márquez (though both Latin American authors are more complex than this binary opposition would indicate). Carey is renowned for the freewheeling fabulation of his style. This stylistic focus occurs despite the often historical or imaginary settings of his fiction. Nevertheless, few novelists, and very few of his level of quality, have registered the political developments of the last thirty years as keenly as has Carey. In “Kristu-Du,” for instance, Carey enters into areas of postcolonial disillusionment and cultural scrutiny more usual for writers such as V.S. Naipaul. But political subtexts are there even in less overtly political works.

It is difficult to put ourselves in context. Part of this is because we know we lack perspective. We are still in the midst of things. Part of it is that we know that contextualizing ourselves will sometimes not be flattering and would reveal aspects of ourselves and our own near past we would rather repress or paper over. That Carey’s work is situated in the political transformation of the world over the past thirty years is a given. That the early stories, especially “Kristu-Du,” reflect, from our perspective, how much (though still not enough) the world has changed is a more daring argument. Understanding that the political subtexts of Carey’s early stories come not just from the politics of the then-past, but also from those of the then-present, will aid in overcoming this reluctance. In interviews, Carey has said that he derived the template for the story from the Third Reich and its master-architect, Albert Speer. But the story’s clearly African and clearly 1970s setting indicates that Carey was not aiming at a direct portrait of the Nazi regime. This regime, after all, would certainly have felt no need to hire a foreign national to design a building for it. Carey was examining how a general authoritarianism flourished in much of the world during much of the twentieth century. This authoritarianism gives the lie to slogans about democratization and progress being concomitant with modernity. This is particularly so in the early 1970s, when countries such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Indonesia (all visited by Carey during his travels in those years) were under authoritarian dictatorships. (Carey also visited Malaysia during this era, and this experience — along, per-

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haps, with Anthony Burgess’s lifelong interest in the Malay language and its potential to yield linguistic play when applied to English – certainly finds its way into the depiction of the Malaysian self-exile of Bob McCorkle / Christopher Chubb in Carey’s latest novel, *My Life as a Fake.* The Soviet Union, entering the ‘era of stagnation’, was little different in practice from many of the right-wing dictatorships it opposed so strenuously in rhetorical terms. Indeed, it was even worse in oppressing scores of unwilling subject peoples. Mainland China, hailed by so many on the Left as an alternative to the USSR, was little if any more democratic. Most of Latin America was under dictatorships of one degree or another of cruelty. So was most of non-Communist Asia. Furthermore, no country in Africa, even, and perhaps especially, those ruled by whites (a point forgotten by 2003’s pro-Iraq war ‘neo-imperialists’), could be said to have a functioning democracy. Both the Right and the Left found themselves having to defend disreputable dictatorships for reasons of expediency. Thus neither tendency can look back with pride on this period in international affairs, one of which a historian (Hugh Thomas, later Lord Thomas of Swynnerton) could aptly remark: “Another thirty [states] are totalitarian, where the state presumes to control the life of the people in the interests of what the administration argues must be the people’s good. The rest are authoritarian, autocratic, or monocratic.”

This was the world in which Peter Carey began his writing career. Based in London during the early 1970s, travelling extensively throughout Europe and Asia, he witnessed this world at first hand. And it is a world that haunts his early short stories. “Room No. 5, Escribo,” is an obvious example. The dystopian, postrevolutionary world of “The Fat Man in History,” of course, follows in a long tradition of such settings. But the atmosphere, particularly the sense of disjuncture between a technical modernity and a state apparatus that is both brutal and inefficient, is straight out of the 1970s. The name “Fantoni” which is so crucial to this unforgettable novella has a Mediterranean air in an era where many dictatorships clustered around the Mediterranean littoral. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is a book psychically very much ‘in touch’ with Carey’s early short fiction, though published as late as 1994. Despite such varied influences as Carey’s own position in 1990s New York, the prominence of South Africa as it moved towards majority rule, and Carey’s own assiduous reading in postcolonial theory, the ghost in the textual machine in *Tristan Smith* is very much a mid-Cold War one in flavour. Australian–American relations are conceived as they were about when the Vietnam War ended and Gough Whitlam was sacked. This conjunction is but an instance of

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a general trauma inherent in the asymmetry of Australian–American relations, to be discussed later.

This mid-Cold War context shows that, when Carey was writing the story, the only real-world equivalents of Oongala’s triumphal totalitarianism were not, alas, in the past. But where exactly is the Kristu-Du? The name Kristu-Du itself is delightfully free of any geographic resonance. Its echoes, of Christ, christening, crystal – the Crystal Palace, perhaps? – combine with echoes of, say, the English fairy-tale writer Lord Dunsany’s “Chu-Bu and Sheemish” to remind us distinctly of the Western fantastic. Yet the name Oongala sounds unquestionably African. Both the prestige enjoyed by Gerrard Haflinger and the anxieties he suffers are only really plausible at this time in an African setting. Idi Amin Dada, the dictator of Uganda from 1971 to 1979, is most often thought of as the character model for Oongala, especially in this description: “a comic-strip dictator, a clown, a buffoon and a mass murderer” (17), though, as will be seen later on, Oongala also possesses some characteristics of the neighbouring leader who overthrew Amin.5

Haflinger’s “selective eye” (21) screens out Oongala’s tyranny, even though on some deep level the architect acknowledges it. His absorption in – obsession, perhaps even infatuation, with – his own work blinds him to the malevolence of the person who is sustaining it and to whose benefit it will redound. To some extent, this is stubbornness. The architect desires to finish what he started, notwithstanding the change in government. (As the passage quoted above indicates, it was Daihusia, the predecessor of Oongala, who had originally commissioned the Kristu-Du.) To some extent it is unspoken white supremacism. The good intentions of the white architect must trump the bad ones of Oongala, simply because, Haflinger tacitly supposes, of Oongala’s non-European origins. Haflinger thinks he can outwit his non-white employer. Most centrally to the story, it registers how totally Haflinger has transferred or displaced his ego into the building, so that it has become an extension of itself, and its not being complete as inconceivable to Gerrard as the maintenance of his own existence. But Haflinger is not without his own conscious defences:

The hypocrites, he thought now, they sit in their exquisite offices while their own governments torture and kill, and because there isn’t a scandalized headline in the newspapers they pretend these things don’t go on. They are so clean, so pure, and I am so terrible. They want me to say: no, I shall abandon this project, the greatest domed structure in the world. I should walk away from it and leave it unfinished or to be ruined by incompetent fools. (18)

5 Bruce Woodcock, Peter Carey (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996): 27, states that “the names of the tribal characters suggests [sic] Africa.”
Haflinger’s defence is not without its plausibility. If the international order allows a man like Oongala to rule unchallenged, then everyone who contributes to, or whose status is undergirded by, this order is in some way culpable. What is indicated here by indirection is the way Western powers were only too happy to see authoritarian governments flourish when it served a tactical purpose for them to do so. There is another dimension to the architect’s comment, though. This is its implication that all governments, by nature, do something of what Oongala does. People who become fervid in protesting against foreign atrocities are more likely than not overlooking some less flagrant but nearly as sinister practice occurring in their own backyard.

Why, then, is Haflinger finally wrong? He is proven wrong in narrative terms by the building being itself a prison, not an arena of social benefit. The denouement illustrates his folly. Thus he is driven mad by it. But even before then, the ground has been removed from beneath his self-confidence. His own surname, Haflinger, or ‘half-linger’, signifies his unexpressed doubts about the course he has chosen. Gerrard is wrong because Oongala, though partaking in the same flaws and appetites as other world leaders, does not have something that they do have: the support and sanction of democratic procedures. For all the known and confessed inadequacies of “parliamentary democracy” (19), there is nothing better than them, and no way of short-circuiting them. The monstrous, horrific revelation of the real nature of the Kristu-Du, as abrupt and terrifying as a knife-twist trick-ending to a science-fiction story or film, is an elaborate metaphor for the fly-in-the-ointment of the architect’s self-conception. In other words, even if the building had been benign, even if it had been a means for social improvement rather than a place of carceral confinement, it still would not have had the consent of the people. There can be no substitute for democracy, not even the most benevolent despotism. That Oongala’s despotism is decidedly malevolent hammers home a point that in any event would have been latent. There can be all manner of extenuating rationales potentially mounted by Haflinger, but the one he cannot transcend is the inescapable issue of consent. In moral terms, people must give consent to what, in large measure, transpires in the public sphere. Authority, while always being, in the human manner, imperfect, must be responsive to the citizens whose governance is the purpose for which the authority exists.

The “sunny pleasure-dome” of Kubla Khan in Coleridge’s poem may be outsize, may be unstable, but is not violently repressive of its citizens. On a smaller but again heuristic level, one suggested by the wording “domed building,” the enthusiasm for the Kristu-Du as edifice evinced by Oongala and Gerrard can be compared to, say, the promotional zeal exercised by a local

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6 This analogy has already been applied by Bruce Woodcock (Peter Carey, 28).
magnate to have a domed sports stadium built at the taxpayers’ expense. It is not the building alone that signifies monstrosity, nor, taken alone, the megalomania. Kubla Khan and the local sports magnate, on their different levels, may be egoists, but they are not monsters. Oongala would not be able to imprison people unjustly if he had not forestalled the proper operation of the procedures of democratic consent and public transparency. Coleridge’s eido-lon of Kubla Khan, as an autocratic, not to mention hedonistic, ruler may not have acknowledged popular opinion. But he did not actively repress or annul it. Ultimately, he was as accountable to it as he was to the wild forces of nature. It is Oongala’s circumvention of the bedrock principle of consent, not megalomania, vainglory, or even a need to control, that makes him, in practical terms, a monster. And on some level Haflinger knows this. Though Oongala is not represented as spouting an ideology, the unacknowledged attraction Haflinger feels for Oongala partakes of the libidinal affinity so many intellectuals in the twentieth century felt for various fascist or Communist regimes. As described by the American sociologist Paul Hollander, a yen for brutality in other countries combined with a surfeit of heedless American innocence to create a whole class of alleged thinkers who sang the praises of this or that repressive system. Although Oongala is not an ideologue, Haflinger’s mission in his country has all the hallmarks of a political pilgrimage. It is vulnerable to the same kind of critique as that levelled against such political pilgrims. This critique was, early on, voiced by Wordsworth, himself someone experienced with political movements which claim far too much from and of their admirers, when he said, in 1811, in an era dominated by one tyrant in particular, “an accursed thing it is to gaze / On prosperous tyrants with a dazzled eye.”

Carey’s use of architecture as a metaphor for this monstrosity is what makes “Kristu-Du” so singularly instructive as narrative. By the end of the story, Kristu-Du, as the name of the building, has acquired not just a denotive but also a metonymic capacity; it stands for the power of the man associated with it. In this way, it is like the metonymic use of ‘the White House’, ‘the Kremlin’, ‘the Vatican’ (the last evoked conspicuously by the repeated mentions of the Kristu-Du being “seven times as big as St Peter’s in Rome,” 18) for the USA, the then-USSR, the Papacy; cf the title ‘Pharaoh’, after Egyptian p’ro, ‘the great house’. But the building is not just metonymic with respect to Oongala. It is also metonymic with respect to the Kristu-Du as

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concrete expression of an inevitable relation to art and power. Haflinger’s self-esteem is inseparable from the construction of the Kristu-Du. The revelation that it is a prison and the consummation of Oongala’s authoritarian will is the coup de grâce that drives him over the edge into insanity. But the very act of putting so many of his energies into the building, alienating them so that the edifice is an aspect of his self (although, as a machine – the metaphor Haflinger himself uses constantly – it can never be part of his organic person, never at all move closer on the scale of relationship from metonymy to synecdoche), also destroys his sanity.

The creative aspect of the architect is inherently metonymic – to some extent because, on any large scale, it is inherently allographic; he does not produce his own product, as the painter, the composer, even to some extent the writer does. This distinction breaks down in terms of production if taken too far, but it stands up in terms of the public image, hence public effect, of the various media. The architect, as a genre, is like the tyrant, as a genre. Both maintain a certain distance from their creations. How can the architect’s personality be that of a building, no matter how much of that personality is put into the design? It is not just that the Oongala regime is unelected. The architect, Gerrard Haflinger, is also unelected. His position in the host society is not legitimated by consent. Thus he is doubly illegitimate, doubly an interloper – first as a foreigner and second as a creature of the regime. Over and above this, as an architect his relation to the landscape, natural and built, is inevitably a regularizing one. There is always a certain standardization in any architecture that aspires to be paradigmatic. Therefore, ipso facto, its capacity to express idiosyncrasy is circumscribed. Architecture, unlike other types of artwork, is a product that, in the first instance, is practical and, in the second, is built, if large-scale in conception, to accommodate a lot of people – as Gerrard Haflinger’s building does, although not in the way its deviser had intended. There is a kind of deniability inherent in the relation between architect and building. This ‘deniability’ denotes an inherent distance that makes the complete displacement of ego into building that occurs in our architect’s case more a symptom, or cause, of madness than would be the case in a relationship between painter and painting. The extrinsic quality that makes architecture inorganic also renders it open to exploitation by totalitarianism.9

9 As Jacques Ellul puts it, “Whatever techniques are involved – human or physical, economic or educational – the state musters around it all available technical instruments. This occurs spontaneously, by chance; but in dictatorial states it is voluntary, calculated studies (and therefore the process occurs more rapidly)”; The Technological Society, tr. John Wilkinson (La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964): 291.
Haflinger’s self-defence is not without insight. Nor is he entirely evil. He has tumbled into his own dream, and been held captive by it. The reader feels compassion for him as well as horror and contempt. Haflinger aspires after the solidity, immovability, and permanence of the building. All the while, he represses his own vulnerability. The simile, noted several times by critics, of Haflinger folding dirty clothes in his laundry basket “as fastidiously as the dresses in a bride’s suitcase” shows how Haflinger, his rigid, rational control, by its own maniacal excess, infolded into a girlish neatness, has been, in his own terms, feminized. He has been placed in a stereotypical, submissive role with respect to the dictator – and all despite his egoistic, Promethean, Captain Ahab-like confidence in his own maverick folly. Fascinatingly, the same circumstances that empower Gerrard Haflinger also victimize him. He feels special, sent on a mission, not only because he is designing the great building, not only because he thinks the building will be somehow the ultimate building, but because he is a white man bringing this idea to a country of non-whites. As with Carey’s other creation of Oscar Hopkins in *Oscar and Lucinda*, his errand into the wilderness is a vainglorious *mission civilisatrice*. And in both instances, the visible form of this mission gone mad is architecture. The Parthenon; the Pantheon; Notre Dame de Paris; the Sistine Chapel; Borobudur; Palenque; all these great buildings have been seen as among the pinnacles of human creativity, not in spite of being buildings, but partly because of them. In this way, architecture, as a perceived medium, is analogous to drama. Drama is often associated with those periods of imaginative literary production particularly valued as culturally instructive (Sophocles in the age of Pericles; Shakespeare in the age of the first Queen Elizabeth). Like drama, architecture is publicly embodied. In its public display and purpose, architecture has had not only the added value of utility but the aesthetic lustre of totality. But in the twentieth century, this tale has grown darker. Architecture’s potential to magnify, and petrify, the existing order is indicated by how many new states hired foreign architects to design great public edifices: an American architectural firm, for instance, designed the (never realized) Tanzanian capital of Dodoma, the planned seat of Julius Nyerere, the undemocratic – though certainly not totalitarian – ruler whose forces overthrew Idi Amin in 1979. But states did not merely gain legitimacy, as in a way had

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10 See Hassall, *Dancing On Hot Macadam*, 52.
11 See William Conklin & James Rossant, “Dodoma, nouvelle capitale de la Tanzanie,” *Architecture d’aujourd’hui* 217 (October 1981): 42. Mwesiga Baregu’s description of the fate of Tanzania’s *ujamaa* collectivization programme has an unmistakably Oongalan resonance: “As soon as the legitimizing objectives came into conflict with the seemingly empowering aspects of *ujamaa*, the former predominated. That is how the voluntary, collective decision phase of *ujamaa* villages quickly gave way to
always been done, through architecture. They used the grandeur and intimidation of architecture to corral their people and keep them in line. With the appearance of totalitarianism came a malevolent form of government not only using buildings as emblems of power and pomp, as had been done from time immemorial, but using the principle of totality against the viewer, not for them. Architecture is used not just to impress, but to intimidate, and not just to intimidate, but to do metaphorically what the Kristu-Du does literally: imprison.

Gerrard Haflinger’s dream of the Kristu-Du as “a machine built for freedom” inevitably recalls the thought of Michel Foucault. Foucault cites Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as the medium for a seemingly benevolent but in fact coercive and containing surveillance. The Kristu-Du, like the Panopticon, is a benevolent machine that either represses in spite of its soi-disant benevolence or represses because of its benevolence. Another postmodern theorist, Giorgio Agamben, posits that the concentration camp, by being all that post-Enlightenment rationality would not consider, is in fact at its conceptual centre. As Michael Hardt, summarizing, though not endorsing, the argument of Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, puts it: “The pinnacle and full realization of modern sovereignty thus becomes the Nazi concentration camp: the zone of exclusion and exception is the heart of modern sovereignty and grounds the rule of law.”¹² Michel de Certeau is the contemporary theorist who has most privileged architecture in his discourse. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau criticized the World Trade Center as an imperial, panoptic tower that suppressed the chaotic flow of historical time but was somehow privileged as the epicentre, the hub, of that synchronizing power. Now, in the aftermath of its loss, the World Trade Center and those who died there occupy a privileged place in the memory-space of New Yorkers and of the world. But this only emphasizes how strategic de Certeau’s focus on architecture as the embodied metaphor of power and domination continues to be. Carey’s residence in New York (he was no more than thirty blocks away from the Twin Towers on the day of the catastrophe) makes the World Trade Center the trope of immediate salience. But Carey’s career-long interest in architecture and its dreams vouchsafes this salience on a more theoretical level. The perpetrators of the September 11 calamity were maintaining the role played by modern totali-

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tarianism in its use of architecture to coerce and intimidate people. Only, this time it was the destruction of architecture that instilled this fear, not its creation. In a way, the obliteration of de Certeau’s excoriated standardizing icon did all the harm, and much more, that he somewhat melodramatically claimed its existence had done in the first place. “Kristu-Du” enables us, without betraying the story’s quintessence, to sound the depths of these postmodern discourses. Carey, who learned so much from postmodern theory in writing what may well eventually be seen as his masterpiece, *Tristan Smith*, here shows that postmodern theory could have learned a lot from him. All these concepts are latent in this short Australian story of the early 1970s.

It is frustrating for scholars of Australian literature, of whatever national provenance themselves, to see postmodern and postcolonial concepts applied to Australia from abroad without an acknowledgment that these ideas were already part of the Australian condition – indeed, far more ‘naturally’ so (whatever that means) than in more storied climes. Australian experiences, and Australian writers like Carey, have as much to teach postcolonial theory as postcolonial theory has to teach Australians. We are used to seeing Australia as a placid settler colony, a displaced Europe with Europe’s achievements, a place without trauma, a history so colourless that it needs beautiful lies to spice it up. But Australia, de-romanticized, is full of trauma. Part of the signal achievement of Carey’s oeuvre is that his vision is not afraid to include acknowledgment of trauma in his historical overview. An experienced reader of Carey realizes that, for instance, the ‘true history’ of the Kelly Gang will not be a hortatory or heedlessly optimistic one. Carey is alert, and not only in *Tristan Smith*, to the reality that part of the Australian trauma is the asymmetry of Australia’s relationship with the senior English-speaking powers, historically and to an extent still culturally with Britain and, today, with the USA. We see this in *Jack Maggs*, with its vivid display of the seeming psychological truism that to be an Australian is to be on the receiving end of experience – to have a relationship to experiences whose only victories will be furtive solaces while the jubilation of the wicked goes unpunished. And we see it in *My Life as a Fake*, where part of the given dynamic (and perhaps part of the huge resonance the Ern Malley hoax continues to have both in Australian culture and in Australia as represented to international culture) is the anxiety that ‘Australia’ itself is a fake, a victimized postcolonial leftover, a quotient of mimicry. The international condition of the ‘Australian’ is *prima facie* traumatic. This is not to mention the manifold actual traumas within Australian history. From the cruelties of transplantation and convict system and the frequent sadism of colonial governors and administrators through the near-extinction of the Aborigines by the white settler system (as the 2002 Phillip Noyce film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* indicated, not without its affinities to
the foreign totalitarianisms from which Australia was supposedly protected by the oceans) to the Howard government’s treatment of the detainees from the MV Tampa in 2001, Australia has not been free from cruelty that, like Oongala’s, insists on writing itself onto the historical and geographical map.13

Nor is Australia without its imaginatively imported buildings. Canberra, the national capital, was, after all, designed by an American architect, Walter Burley Griffin. Yarralumla is no Kristu-Du. But this episode has distant echoes in Carey’s short story “American Dreams” and perhaps also in the glass church of Oscar and Lucinda. This novel’s major theme, the transportation of Western forms to circumstances which do not suit them, is cognate with that of “Kristu-Du.”14 One of Carey’s most laudable achievements is to show the authoritarian underside of democratic, peace-loving Australia, to display Australian society’s fears as well as its hopes, its nightmares as well as its genuine, and genuinely meritorious, dreams. In today’s world, there is little tolerance for authoritarian regimes. As the political scientist Robert Strayer puts it,

> In the ‘third wave’ of democracy, dozens of countries have made a transition from highly authoritarian or military rule to multi-party systems with contested elections [...]. Western-style democracy has become widely regarded as a universal value, losing much of its earlier identification with the West.15

Even if Saddam Hussein’s Iraq had not invaded two other countries, and thus furnished a plausible rationale for its eventual overthrow, it would have been a pariah in today’s world. At the very least, it would not have drawn admirers. An index of this difference can be seen in how readily, for instance, Australia, under a leftist government to boot, accepted the non-democratic government of Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor in 1975. In 1999, Australia, at the world’s insistence, intervened to safeguard the welfare of the Timorese, to protect them from further atrocities, and ultimately to help supervise the transition to independence and democratic government. Australians can be proud

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13 Indeed, Kwaku Larbi Korang, summarizing Bill Ashcroft, has maintained “that though Africa and Australia are geographically remote from each other, in terms of the existential and cultural demands made on both by and under the contemporary postimperial world order, the two regions are not really that far removed from each other.” See Korang, “Africa and Australia Revisited: Reading Kate Grenville’s Joan Makes History,” Antipodes 17.1 (2003): 5–12.

14 See Paul Theroux, Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), where the efforts of Julius Nyerere to translate Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar into Swahili (234) combine elements of both Oscar Hopkins’s and Oongala’s hubris.

of their achievement in facilitating this process. Even more, they should be proud of how practices of democracy always maintained in Australia are now more prevalent and more admired in the rest of the world. But the world of a generation ago should not be forgotten. Peter Carey’s early short stories, in their manifest premise and content, are invented and metafictional. Yet they preserve – indeed, in a way more solid and realistic narratives do not – a world with political contours whose emotional valency is in danger of being forgotten even though the facts themselves persist. This is not to say that these stories are only of past relevance. Today’s world, though liberated from many of the particular burdens enunciated above, is hardly utopian. Issues of citizenship and personal empowerment within globalization, of the shifting roles of elites and subalterns in a transnational economy amid transnational population flows, the problematization of individual power as juxtaposed to ascribed collective mentalities – all this means that the dilemmas of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes persist today in new forms. This is so even though, unlike in ‘Oongala’s’ time and place, their hold is velvet, not iron. The subject-matter of “Kristu-Du” is still a live issue in the twenty-first century.

In the USA, Peter Carey, despite the manifest sombreness of many of his characteristic themes, is often seen as an optimistic writer.\textsuperscript{16} This has at least partly to do with the popular, still-prevalent tourist-oriented image of Australia, as well as with a certain sense that the historical novel exists to buttress the past and reassure us about its legacy (if one ignores Carey’s own claims that he writes “science fiction of the past”\textsuperscript{17}). In Britain, on the other hand, where his reception has been equally enthusiastic, darker tonalities in his cultural vision are more openly acknowledged. The biographer Hermione Lee, for instance, says that Carey is a “genuinely socialist novelist” who is “always writing about the people who have been done over by authority.”\textsuperscript{18} This is why tragic novels such as Marcus Clarke’s \textit{His Natural Life} have as of yet no hope of being revived as serious reading in the USA. The pessimism and despair of “Kristu-Du” diverts it to the less popular strain of Australian lite-


nature. For example, in the Carey canon, _Bliss_ – which balances its dystopia with a redemptive utopia – and even the really quite dark, but narratively bouncy, _Illywhacker_ have far more admirers in the USA than the brooding _The Tax Inspector_ or the subversive _Tristan Smith_. Carey, of course, leaves us hope that the writer’s self-awareness, the ruthless assessment by the narrative perspective of its own implication in what it chronicles, may bring light to this darkness. Perhaps it will prevent us from being sated by what Gerard Manley Hopkins termed the “carrion comfort” of despair.¹⁹ Unlike Gerrard Haflinger, the dazzled architect, Carey, undazzled, knows what he is building – a sound basis for future consolation.

**Works Cited**


PART III:
PERSPECTIVES ON INDIVIDUAL FICTIONS
Peter Carey’s Short Stories

Trapped in a Narrative Labyrinth

CORNELIA SCHULZE

Introduction

Throughout Carey’s fiction, both literal and figurative entrapments are invoked […]. His fictions abound with actual prisons and cages, which perhaps serve as metonym for Australian society. But he also is fascinated by the construction of entrapping structures […] and often that involves individual, figuratively entrapping structures. ¹

Both Peter Carey’s novels and his short stories frequently contain restrictive situations, places and events. In his narratives Carey creates fictive worlds that follow their own logic and often incorporate surreal, fabulous and bizarre elements. Anthony Hassall observes rightly that “Carey is a poet of fear and the tales that he tells explore the blacker recesses of the personal and the national psyches.”² Hence we are often confronted with dystopian visions in which the protagonists struggle ineffectively to escape. These visions are plainly recognizable as fear-haunted, terrifying mirror images of today’s late-capitalist world. Simultaneously,

Carey manipulates the relation to the reader in such a way that the latter feels as trapped or powerless as the people in the novelist’s universe: “if Carey writes like an angel, the people whose stories he tells are caged in a hellish world.” 3 This essay will show the various modes of captivity presented in Carey’s short stories and will explore how he manages to drag the reader into these claustrophobic visions.

Producing a nightmarish vision of the corrupt and crumbling cultures from which both protagonists and readers try to escape, Carey triggers and intensifies his readers’ existential angst, forcing them to confront their deepest fears. A revaluation of his intentions, however, suggests that this ‘double captivity’ may eventually lead to liberation. By forcing his readers to identify with the victimized anti-heroes of his stories, he may, in fact, be offering them a (post) modern mode of catharsis. While for Aristotle ‘catharsis’ implied a controlled release of harmful emotions (pity and fear) which the spectator brings from everyday life, it seems to be Carey’s intention to purge his readers of emotions that disturb their capacity to analyse and thus understand their own dilemma. Despite his apocalyptic visions, Carey believes in the “human spirit” as a power to overcome the restrictive conditions of (contemporary) human existence.

Peter Carey’s Narrative Trickery: 
A Modified Author–Reader Relation

Peter Carey’s narrative talent is undisputed. 5 In his stories, Carey does not comply with the commonly agreed sense of what constitutes ‘reality’, either in fictional or in extra-fictional experience. 6 Instead, the stories are pointillist narrative fragments, and Carey “confronts his readers with disturbing versions of themselves and their unpleasant society.” 7 He often crosses the conventional boundaries of social acceptability and credibility, a method that he re-

3 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 5.
6 See Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 8.
7 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 9.
fined while working as a copywriter in an advertising agency. It is commonly agreed that his distinctive mode of narration developed from his involvement in this modern medium:

Like a number of his contemporaries, including Murray Bail, Morris Lurie and Barry Oakley, Carey came from the world of advertising copywriting, a world in which the writer as prophet, the writer as visionary, the writer as moralist, the writer as historian, had been superseded by the writer as manipulator, the writer as technician of special effects. The skill lay in producing a powerful reader response. This was the post-modern aesthetic of the game, the enigma, the construct, the product.8

The playful and manipulative relation between copywriter and potential consumer is analogous to the relation between the author Carey and his readership. Carey has to face the dilemma of a serious and acclaimed writer working full-time in commerce. His professional background divides critics and readers alike:

If Carey appeared not to know whether to be “proud or ashamed” then it was probably because the media’s treatment of this aspect of his life was itself a rhetoric of ambivalence, which ranged from a celebration of his earthliness (belonging to the ‘real’ world), to vilifying him for having sold his creative soul to an industry of pseudo-creative and manipulative social strategists.9

Some critics are not at ease with a writer who is capable of employing manipulative strategies ‘against’ the reader. According to Suzan Ryan–Fazilleau,10 for instance, this way of narrating inevitably leads to a frustrating reading session which endangers the traditional relationship of trust between author and reader:

In Carey’s short stories the reader finds himself on unfamiliar terrain, for […] the author deliberately and constantly undermines our confidence in him, his text and ourselves. This approach subverts the symbiotic type of author/reader relationship we are used to. (51)

As evidence for the changed author–reader relation, Ryan–Fazilleau presents four narrative strategies that Carey uses in his short stories (51–58): first, she accuses Carey of “casting aspersions on the reader’s intelligence” (51), as the

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narrator, though making statements that cannot be decoded, maliciously pun-
ishes his readers for their failure to decode. Secondly, Carey is blamed for
“foster[ing] incomprehension” (52) on a thematic level by repeatedly using
misleading references or motifs. Thirdly, he is reproached for “undermining
the credibility of his narrator” (56) so that the reader is persistently reminded
of the unreliability of the story. Fourthly, Ryan–Fazilleau holds it against
Carey that he “invades what is generally the reader’s private domain” (57), as
he determines what questions readers should ask themselves and what inter-
pretative conclusions they should come to.

Her analysis of the strategies that Carey uses to unsettle his readers, how-
ever, helps to rearrange the power balance that had been manipulated to their
disadvantage. Thus Ryan–Fazilleau assumes that Carey prefers a reader who
truly challenges him: “he wants an active opponent of a playing standard
(almost) equal to his own” (62). Although she wrote her essay, with its meta-
phors of games and war, with a wink of admiration for the “brilliant and
diabolical Carey” (57), she nevertheless implies that Carey’s narrative trick-
ery is really only an end in itself: its purpose seems to be to entertain the
author and little else. Yet a different evaluation of Carey’s intentions is pos-
sible.

The present essay is based on the hypothesis that Carey intentionally mani-
pulates the reader to show how in today’s Western world human beings are
victims of a repressive system: late capitalism. In order to unmask the perfidi-
ous mechanisms of suppression, Carey transfers these in terms of content
(motif of entrapment) and form (manipulative control of the reader) to his
own short stories. Carey’s short stories thus challenge his readers to unmask
not only the world of fiction but also their own ‘real’ world. Carey’s experi-
ences as a professional ‘ad-man’ help him to expose the true dynamics and
their effects from inside the system of the commercial world. The central
question therefore becomes: what are Carey’s intentions? To avoid specula-
tion, the following reading is backed up by comments Carey typically makes
in interviews.

Peter Carey’s Short Stories as Lehrstücke

Carey’s short stories, I would argue, can be understood in the Brechtian sense
as Lehrstücke or brief didactic dramatizations. In an interview, Carey expres-
ses his anxiety about the fact that many people live under nightmarish condi-
tions without ever noticing them, let alone changing them: “People often live
in nightmares without knowing it. The nightmare creeps up on them and even
when it’s at its most intense it feels quite normal to them. Not nice, but nor-
mal.”¹¹ In Carey’s sketches of reality, which combine scrupulously realistic details and surreal logic, the protagonists have either come to an impasse or find themselves in situations they are not responsible for but nevertheless have to bear. Whereas some characters hopelessly rebel against their living conditions, most of them accept them as destiny. Carey has confessed that, in retrospect, “my stories made me tense and ill and I wept for the fate of these poor bloody losers.”¹² The source of their undue acceptance of everyday mania is, according to Carey, alienation, a direct product of late capitalism:

We are alienated from each other, from ourselves, work, from our environment. We are denied access to information and given misinformation instead. We are raised within an authoritarian system and teach our children to look for leaders. […] I don’t think people are mindless or stupid and no matter how fucked around we are by the values of late capitalism, I still think there is some residual human decency in most of us.¹³

As information is held back or distorted in our everyday life, so Carey uses the above-mentioned narrative techniques to initially mislead his readers. Whereas Ryan–Fazilleau categorizes this as hostility towards his own readers, it could be argued that Carey encourages his readers to unmask these strategies. By doing so, he undermines the authority of the written word and thus promotes a more critical reception of (literary) texts.

Carey’s Concept of Character:
“Character [as] a bit of clay”¹⁴

It is Carey’s prime concern to show how our existing economic and social system has a corruptive and alienating effect on the individual. He therefore creates characters that are just as alienated from their habitats: “I make very serious attempts to produce characters who are not alienated, but then I always feel a bit safer, a lot more confident, when I’ve made them a little obsessive, a mite neurotic, a smidgin more like me.”¹⁵ In contrast to the American mentality that allows for heroes, Australian self-awareness tends to generate losers. Carey self-ironically adds: “it is a relief to be able to blame [the

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¹⁵ Carey in Bennett, Australian Short Fiction, 73.
lack of confidence] on a national characteristic rather than a personal fail-
ing.”16 Although Carey would welcome more self-responsibility, he also re-
recognizes that the globalized world has a restrictive rather than stimulating
effect on individual development. This is why his readers seldom encounter
characters of integrity leading a responsible and self-determined life; instead,
situation and character are subject to the story’s higher intentions: “In fiction I
do like the notion of a plastic malleable world where a character can be
shaped and formed, and everything in the story or the novel is for the needs of
the story, so you can shape character like a bit of clay.”17

In his short stories – which Carey himself calls a “collection of ‘what if’
stories”18 – his characters are treated like test-subjects in a series of experi-
ments, in which – under laboratory conditions – different reactions are run
through. Carey produces four different set-ups, each of which is meant to un-
mask a certain mode of entrapment. These four basic variants correspond to
Bruce Woodcock’s categorization of Carey’s short stories into four subject
areas: “American imperialism and culture; capitalism; power and authority;
and gender.”19 Through these diverse subjects and narrative strategies, the
theme of entrapment can be identified as a leading principle in Carey’s short
stories.

Modes of Entrapment in Peter Carey’s Short Stories

Carey’s short stories are conceived in such a way that both readers and char-
acters are trapped in numerous ways, and it is the readers’ and characters’
prime duty to try to escape:

Like the stories of Kafka, Kundera and J.G. Ballard, these gnomic parables
of imprisonment and metamorphosis destabilise traditional constructions of
fictional reality, leaving the reader with a suggestive and beckoning array of
alternative interpretations which elude any ultimate certainty.20

Whereas most of his characters fail to liberate themselves, Carey’s readers are
persuaded to reconsider and change their situations. In the following pages the
four variants of entrapment will be described on the basis of exemplary short
stories, and Carey’s strategies of reader control will also be taken into account.

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16 Eleanor Wachtel, “‘We Really Can Make Ourselves Up’: An Interview with
17 Carey in Bennett, Australian Short Fiction, 195.
19 Woodcock, Peter Carey, 18.
20 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 9.
American Imperialism: Trapped in the ‘American Dream’

The first instrument used by late capitalism to subordinate human beings is the unstoppable and worldwide expansion of “American imperialism and culture.” This mode of captivity is illustrated by “American Dreams,” a story that shows Australia’s increasing dependence on America and the attendant devaluation of its own national identity. The story is taken from The Fat Man in History (1974), Carey’s first collection of short stories – parabolic tales that depict societies either out of control or entirely under the control of anonymous, malevolent powers. The stories may be considered as

chamber pieces from a chamber of horrors, [...] populated by characters only an author could love, the misfits, losers and rejects of those societies who face isolation, alienation, boredom and unemployment, and who undergo frightening metamorphoses in their desperate attempts to escape and survive.21

In “American Dreams” Carey constructs the image of an Australian small town whose inhabitants dream the American Dream of prosperity and possession of status symbols. Different modes of narration are mixed; the story begins ostensibly in the Lawson tradition of realism, but it also contains bizarre and fantastic elements: “‘American Dreams’ takes the orthodox realist story of outback communities and injects a dislocating strangeness into it.”22 The nameless narrator reports how the inhabitants’ ardent desire to live under glorified American conditions seems to be fulfilled when, in the estate of a deceased inhabitant, a perfect miniature version of the town is discovered. This soon turns into a tourist attraction, and American dollars start pouring into the town. What at first appears to be a real godsend becomes a curse; Carey’s “essential intuition [in this] is how dependent folk happily collaborate in their subjection.”23 It is suggested that the “condition of captivity, both literal and metaphorical, may involve some clandestine coercion, but is enabled by the captivating allure (however specious, hand-me-down, two-dimensional) of the dominant culture.”24 In this case, a replica of the small Australian town becomes the object of a perilous pact with the ‘colonizer’. The builder of the replica, Mr Gleason, not only reproduced the streets and buildings in great detail but also fashioned miniature figures of each inhabitant. Initially, the

21 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 28.  
22 Woodcock, Peter Carey, 18.  
24 Pierce, “Captivity,” 149.
narrator describes the replica as “the most incredibly beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.”\textsuperscript{25} Here Carey seems to be conveying the romantic concept of art whereby the inner beauty of ordinary things is presented to the beholder. But soon this piece of art becomes a threat to the inhabitants: since the roof of each miniature house can be lifted up, the artefact enables the beholder to take an intrusive look behind the scenes. The initial pleasure at having a voyeuristic peek at other people’s private lives soon gives way to the fear that one’s own abyss might be discovered: “If Gleason knew about Mrs Cavanagh and Craigie Evans (and no one else had), what other things might he know? […] We gazed silently at the roofs and felt mistrustful and guilty” (178–79). What initially seems to be an affirmation suddenly produces paranoia. But before the miniature model can be destroyed by the enraged inhabitants, it is upgraded to a media event. In the process, the people affected are exposed to this uninvited spectacle and feel completely helpless. Carey discloses their impotence in the way in which he presents the decision of the minister of tourism, whereby the “model town and its model occupants were to be preserved” (179). By using a passive construction and the term “occupants,” the inhabitants are stylized as prisoners of their own world. In addition, the American visitors are not content to look at the miniature model, but expect the inhabitants to pose exactly as Mr Gleason had immortalized them, so that a viewer could, with the help of a telescope, compare the original with the copy.

The look through the telescope symbolizes the process of colonization. As the American visitors observe the small town from a hill, their arrogant superiority becomes manifest. Paradoxically, the Americans prefer the miniature model to reality, and never doubt its originality; by contrast, the ‘real’ people of the town are observed mistrustfully – their world is turned inside out and americanized, for the American idea of ‘reality’ has become more important than reality itself (see 181). The miniature model becomes a marker of a ‘distorted’ reality, and the Americans sit in judgement on originality and plagiarism. The American Dream turns out to be a nightmare. Obviously, the static model freezes the existing developmental stage, so that the realization of the collective wish for prosperity ultimately leads to the destruction of the idyll.\textsuperscript{26} Accordingly, the miniature model symbolizes the insight that cultural dependency leads to the loss of individual and national identity. At the end of

\textsuperscript{25} Carey, \textit{Collected Stories} (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 1995): 177. All further page references to Carey’s stories in the main text are from this collection.

“American Dreams,” Carey implies that American imperialism is harmful for both sides:

The Americans pay one dollar for the right to take our photographs. Having paid the money they are worried about being cheated. They spend their time being disappointed and I spend my time feeling guilty that I have somehow let them down by growing older and sadder. (181)

Such a strange interdependent relation between ‘imperial power’ and ‘colony’ leads to an endless cycle of mutual (material and spiritual) devaluation. Two additional short stories make Carey’s scrutiny of the power-relation between Australia and America even clearer. In “Crabs” and “A Windmill in the West,” Carey’s critique of American imperial and cultural dominance is epitomized in apocalyptic visions of the future. In both short stories, the central character finds himself in a hopeless situation: In “Crabs,” the protagonist and his girl-friend, along with all the visitors to a “Star Drive-in Theatre,” are kept imprisoned for an indefinite amount of time. Disregarding his girl-friend, Crabs prepares his own breakout by turning into a vehicle:

The transformations that Crabs and his environment undergo are not, as in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” involuntary, nor does Crabs turn into an insect, or even a plant or an animal, as in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. […] Within this shifting and disturbing context is a narrative which enacts Crabs’s psychological decline as his adolescent guilts and fears are projected into a nightmarish psychodrama of punishment and exclusion.27

Although Crabs’ metamorphosis into a truck seems at first to be a success, the protagonist is led in a circular movement back to the starting-point. Owing to his egoistic attitude, the former victim turns into an offender. This coexistence of virtue and vice in one and the same person is found again in a related short story. In “A Windmill in the West,” an American soldier has to guard a border in the midst of an Australian desert that he is supposed to consider as the dividing-line between Australia and America, “although, in fact, it was not [America]” (94). As time goes by, the soldier becomes unsure which side of the border he is supposed to guard: “One function that the fence does serve is to provide a site for the psychological torture of its supposed guardian. The soldier is unhinged by his solitary confinement and his forced inactivity.”28

His arbitrary role as both victim and offender is shown in his behaviour towards the Australian pilot of a civil aeroplane who – as he had himself – makes an emergency landing after losing his sense of direction. The soldier

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27 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 9–10.
28 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 18.
orders petrol, as the aeroplane’s petrol tank is almost empty, but when the
pilot, waving gratefully, flies in the wrong direction, the soldier, without fur-
ther ado, conscientiously shoots him down. The soldier’s irrational shooting
can be regarded as an “all-too-obvious analogy for the ‘accidental’ firing of
the nuclear warheads controlled by such installations under the same personal
pressures of boredom, isolation, inactivity and disorientation.”29 All of
Carey’s short stories that belong to the category “American imperialism and
culture” can thus be said to share one distinctive feature: the protagonists not
only find themselves in hopeless situations but also lose their ‘innocence’ in
the sense that, once they gain power, they abuse it.

**Capitalism: Trapped in the Capitalist System**

The corrupting American influence is also noticeable in the second group of
short stories, those that Woodcock gathers under the heading of “capitalism.”
The connection between capitalism and (abuse of) power, which is a variant
of entrapment, once again expresses Carey’s scepticism towards power-posi-
tions, although he does not polarize the actors into victims and offenders. As
an example of this mode of entrapment, the title story of *War Crimes* (1979),
Carey’s second collection, is particularly suitable for discussion. Each story in
Carey’s award-winning anthology is about power, “about those who wield it,
those who want it, and those who recall only its dazzling exhilaration and de-
gradation.”30 As “War Crimes” is of novella length, Carey can develop more
sustained and sophisticated themes and situations, “while retaining the styl-
istic concision and the sharp-edged clarity of the earlier volume.”31 Of this
volume, Carey comments that “most of [the characters] are defeated […] but
it’s a more complex battle and a more complex defeat.”32 In “War Crimes”
Carey returns to his main theme of the structures and mechanisms of power in
personal as well as social relationships. The way the story unfurls implies a
high degree of moral equivalence between ‘war crimes’ and crimes commit-
ted in the conduct of business.

Accordingly, as the density of texture increases, it becomes more difficult
for the reader to find his way. The thesis that Carey deliberately manipulates
his readers to exact a more critical attitude of mind is supported when his
readers are asked in “War Crimes” – albeit in an indirect way – to follow his
storyline attentively. As early as in the first of the fourteen numbered internal

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32 Carey, in John Maddocks, “Bizarre Realities: An Interview with Peter Carey,”
segments of the story, he points out the freedom – and indeed obligation – that the reader has to form an opinion about his tale: “In the end I shall be judged” (310). This key sentence may be interpreted as a prophecy on the part of both narrator and author. The narrator fears the consequences of his deeds and their presentation by a third party; at the same time, Carey as a writer addresses the readers who will eventually judge his narrative. This ambiguity may be considered as a strategy to unsettle his readers, yet it could also serve as a strategy for arousing their attention. By scolding literary critics, Carey implicitly reminds his readers of their potential to read texts critically:

They will write about me in books and take care to explain me so badly that it is better that I do it myself. They will write with the stupid smugness of middle-class intellectuals, people of moral rectitude who have never seriously placed themselves at risk. […] They will write about me as a tyrant, a psychopath, an aberrant accountant, and many other things, but it would never once occur to them that I might know exactly what I am doing. (310)

This reprimand should not be taken literally but, rather, as a covert request to the story’s readers to use their critical faculty of judgement. Carey calls attention to the authority of any knowledgeable reader by demonstrating the writer’s dependency on his or her readership. Likewise, the narrator is aware of his desire to gain recognition: “I cannot begin to tell you how I loathe them, how I have, in weaker moments, envied them, how I longed to be accepted by them” (310). As the real person Carey and the fictive narrator seem to become one, the readers addressed are split into two groups, “they” and “you.” The narrator/writer appeals to the latter in a conspiratorial voice as if his revelations could arouse sympathy. The readers, who catch themselves wanting to prove themselves worthy of this confidence, are torn between virtually enforced loyalty to the narrator/writer and their own increasing disgust with the acts of violence being disclosed, and are thus forced into passivity: “Carey is peremptory here, virtually ordering us to follow the lead he indicates rather than choosing our own method of approach […], presuming to prolong his own authority over his text and thus usurp ours.”33

The objective of this authoritarian control over the reader could be to warn the reader against being too gullible. Readers should not conform to other people’s expectations, but should see themselves, rather, as belonging to the more demanding group of those who are ostensibly being rebuked. In the twelve internal sections of the story that follow, the first-person narrator reports in retrospect that the so-called “war crimes” are crimes committed in the business world. Together with his business partner Bart, the narrator is

instructed to stave off the bankruptcy of a company producing cheap instant meals for the unemployed masses that cannot afford quality food. The cliché of the cold-blooded businessman is worn to a shred when, at the very end of the story, readers witness a mass execution of the unemployed. The helpless position of Carey’s readers, who become tacit observers incapable of acting, implies a certain complicity. This suggests that Carey prefers those readers who intervene and thus, in a figurative sense, show courage. In an interview, Carey declares his intention to unmask the mechanisms of late capitalism by overdrawing them: “[Although the story] pushes things to extremes a bit, [it captures] the logic of business [and] my view of late capitalism.” Resistance remains the prerogative of every individual.

The well-known slogan “BUSINESS MUST GO ON” written in capital letters serves as the motto of this vicious tale. But the narrator is strangely torn. Although he is disgusted by his own violent crimes, he nevertheless pleads for sympathy, since he attributes these acts of violence to his low self-esteem and traumatic experiences in childhood. Since the narrator grew up in deprived circumstances and became the victim of violent infringements (and later is himself an offender), he reads his “war crimes” as mere acts of compensation. However bizarre and vicious his deeds, the insights into the offender’s psyche and background make it more difficult to condemn him:

My father lost his hand in a factory. He carried the stump with him as a badge of his oppression by factories. When I was very small I saw that my father had no hand and concluded that my hand would also be cut off when the time came. […]. My fear was so intense that all communication on the subject was unthinkable. It would be done just as they had mutilated my cock by cutting off the skin on its head.

Here the narrator remembers his father’s loss of his hand to a factory machine, and explains his love–hate relationship to the factory he now manages, but whose production-site he can visit only with intense anxiety. Not only does Carey discuss the repression suffered by the (factory) workers in the industry, he also points out the negative repercussions on the mental health of the next generation. To make these consequences a taboo subject in this particular case leads to their continuation. The disempowerment of the individual becomes even more obvious when the narrator explains: “But nothing dulls me to the assault of factories and I carry with me, still, the conviction that I will end up at the bottom of the shit pile, powerless against the machines in factories” (325). Instead of being active on behalf of factory workers, the narrator assumes the position of the manager in the factory and implements a regime of

34 Carey, in Maddocks, “Bizarre Realities,” 40.
terror and exploitation – an implicit explanation of the cause of violence that reminds us of socio-scientific case studies. The narrator goes on to explain his paranoia and its cause:

I have spent my life in a state of constant fear that could be understood by very few. I have anticipated disaster at every turn, physical attack at every instant. To be born small and thin and poor, one learns, very quickly, of one’s vulnerability. [...] The extent of my terrible quaking fear was in exact correspondence with the degree of my craziness. For I performed unthinkable acts of cruelty to others, total bluffs that would prevent all thought of retaliation. (329)

As an example of his acts of violence, the narrator describes an incident in his early childhood: “When I was six years old I threw a cat into an incinerator. It wasn’t until the cat came running out the grate at the bottom, burning, screaming, that I had any comprehension of what I had done” (331). An act of curiosity soon develops into an act of cruelty that can hardly be associated with a six-year-old. His actual deed is immortalized in recurring nightmares: “the burning cat still runs through my dreams searing me with its dreadful knowledge“ (331). When Bart ‘accidentally’ shoots a boy, the narrator interprets this situation as “Bart’s burning cat” (331) and also as an inevitable side-effect of the business world: “It is the nature of business that as a result of your decisions some people will starve and others be killed” (331). This violence, presented as if it were unavoidable, escalates in the last three narrative sections. In the twelfth paragraph, the boy who has been killed is hung up as a diffuse warning to the unemployed: “Let that warn the bastards. [...] The unemployed shall buzz with powerless rage” (333). Bart’s disgust about the boy’s death is no longer perceivable when the dead body is turned into an emblem of the powerlessness of the unemployed in general. Finally, the head of the accounts department is publicly executed, since the narrator assumes that he has embezzled funds. Without consulting with his business partner, the narrator prepares Sergei’s death sentence with great relish: “It will be a most inventive execution, far more interesting than his dull childish cheating” (333). Later on, it comes to light that Bart had instructed Sergei to skim off profits to rebuild the factories so that they appeared less intimidating:

They have worried about aesthetics.

Areas of peaceful blue and whole fields of the most lyrical green. In these ideal conditions people perform insulting functions, successfully imitating the functions of mid-twentieth-century machinery.

This is Bart and Sergei’s masterpiece, their gift to me. (335)
Just as Carey proclaims the miniature model in “American Dreams,” in which the town’s inhabitants become the tourists’ puppets-on-a-string, to be a piece of art, so are the factories in “War Crimes” turned into an artistic masterpiece in which the factory workers are trapped in fixed work-routines. For these cosmetic changes cannot conceal the fact that the workers still have to perform monotonous activities. Consequently, both the rebuilding and Sergei’s death are pointless. Bart’s loss of his close friend Sergei arouses an urge to wilful homicide in him; fearing that his business partner may give way to these impulses, the narrator orders the execution of the unemployed, as “it will give him a use for his rage” (336). Carey thwarts the reader’s impulse to gain distance from the narrator by explaining that malice is in every human being: “And I am not mad, but rather I have opened the door you all keep locked with frightened bolts and little prayers. I am more like you than you know” (336).

The last short section functions as a cruel finale. The unemployed are driven off the factory grounds and workers burn them alive with flamethrowers. The narrator observes the scene through binoculars, thus dissociating himself from the incident. Here his diabolical masterpiece is completed, and he considers himself as part of an endless chain of tyrants: “As I watched men run through the heat burning other men alive, I knew thousands of men had stood on hills or roofs and watched such scenes of terrible destruction, the result of nothing more than their fear and their intelligence” (337). Callously watching over the scene, he identifies his own fears as the cause of the mass execution. If he had confronted these fears, this massacre would have been preventable. Carey embellishes this apocalyptic scenario with the final words: “I wished I had been born a great painter. [...] I would have stood aloft, a judge, rather than wearily kept vigil on this hill, hunchbacked, crippled, one more guilty fool with blood on his hands” (337). Once again the narrator presents himself as a victim of circumstances that duly turned him into an aggressor. Some readers might feel that Carey has pushed things too far; nevertheless, “War Crimes” effectively illustrates what might happen if someone evades responsibility and yields to his destructive urges: “The satiric burden of the story is that, when the euphemisms and the self-deceptions are stripped away, that code is no more than the unacceptable face of an all-too-familiar capitalism.”³⁵ Carey suggests that every human being has the freedom of choice either to support or to resist a repressive system such as late capitalism.

³⁵ Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 61.
The third variant of entrapment can be found in stories grouped together by Woodcock under the heading of “power and authority,” of which “Life and Death in the South Side Pavilion” may serve as an example. This short story reminds us of “War Crimes” – it, too, is told from the point of view of a nameless male narrator, at a certain point turns into a confession, and is divided into numbered internal sections. At the beginning of the story, the narrator declares his intention of quitting his job, which consists in preventing a herd of horses from drowning in a swimming pool. He expresses his disconcertment with this activity in the fourth paragraph, which consists of one sentence in capital letters: “I AM HERE TO STOP THE HORSES FALLING INTO THE SWIMMING POOL” (52). Further conditions remain mysterious – for example, neither the narrator nor his employer is named. While the employer’s anonymity intensifies the reader’s impression of a faceless authority, the withholding of a name for the narrator suggests his powerlessness. When the narrator signs his request to be released from his job, he uses the official term that already discloses his low status: “Shepherd 3rd Class in the South Side Pavilion” (51). From the point of view of the dubious employer, the employee’s identity consists merely of the particulars of task, status and location. On the other hand, his girl-friend is given a name, Marie, and this difference marks further privileges: she can leave the pavilion at all times, and she sets the conditions of their togetherness. In the end he is forced by Marie to make a choice: “Either I leave the horses or she will leave me” (52). Marie presents herself as arbitrary and inconsiderate. Although she found him the job, she suddenly expects him to follow her – neither for him nor for the reader is it clear where she will lead him.

The narrator is trapped in a paradoxical situation: although he suffers from each and every equine death, he presumes that he can leave the scene as soon as the last animal has died. The narrator’s physical and mental state deteriorates when he recognizes that each act of love with Marie causes a further death, because he is neglectful of his duties, and his frustration is expressed when he writes the following proclamation: “EVERY TIME I FUCK MARIE I KILL A HORSE” (54). Soon his sense of guilt causes impotence – a connection he is painfully aware of: “And now that I am unable to make love she thinks it is because I have an unnatural attraction to the horses and that I find her unattractive in comparison. But I am unable to make love because every time I make love a horse falls into the pool” (54). Rather than consoling her lover, Marie suggests that he has a desire for sodomy. In this context of power and powerlessness Carey comments explicitly on gender relations. Interestingly, the narrator is allocated typically ‘female’ qualities such as care, compassion and self-sacrifice, whereas Marie acts in a way that is traditionally
considered to be typically ‘male’; she makes autonomous decisions and acts egocentrically. In addition, the narrator shows a strong need to talk, whereupon Marie ridicules him: for instance, when the narrator assumes that the noises made during the sexual act may lead to panic and drive the terrified horses into the pool, Marie sarcastically answers, “you attribute great power to your cock” (54). This statement underlines the narrator’s powerlessness, particularly as he already suffers from impotence. When Marie eventually leaves him, the narrator’s physical and emotional state improves: “Her absence has cured my limp cock more quickly and effectively than either of us could have guessed” (54). As his manliness is restored, his urge to escape from his imprisonment becomes stronger, and his carefulness gives way to indifference: “At this moment I am prepared to fuck until the pool is full of horses” (55). While the impression is heightened that acted-out sexuality is per se destructive, Carey plays around with the cliché that masculinity is inseparably connected with egoism and autonomy, so that his previous reversal of ‘male’ and ‘female’ qualities is at this point being revised.

The narrator deliberately drives the rest of the horses into the pool: “It was sickeningly easy. They fell into the water like overripe fruit from a tree, often before the whip had touched them” (55). This scene is reminiscent of the mass execution at the end of “War Crimes,” even though, given the surreal quality of the scene, the death of the horses appears to be less drastic. As the image of the abused cat keeps haunting the narrator in “War Crimes,” so memories of the horses’ cadavers in the overcrowded pool haunt the narrator in this story. Yet “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” does not end in nightmares that disturb the narrator’s sleep, but in the nightmare of real life: the narrator’s cruelty does not lead to redemption, but only back to the starting-point of his predicament: “They have brought replacements” (55). The narrator’s desperate plea to be released from this absurd task is ignored. He is left behind, trapped in an allocated, lifelong activity. This connection between sexuality and destruction is maintained in a last group of short stories, which deal explicitly with gender issues.

Gender: Trapped in Dissolving Gender Roles

The fourth variant of entrapment can be observed in the short stories dealing with ‘gender’. In “Peeling,” one of Carey’s earliest stories (from The Fat Man in History, 1974), gender differences seem to vanish. The story is about an older man who describes his relationship to a young woman called Nile. Again Carey influences the reader’s expectations – his first-person narrator warns: “our relationship is beyond analysis” (84). As in previous short stories, this warning may be read as an appeal to the reader to deal actively with the
relationship presented in the narrative. The fact that “Peeling” is not told in retrospect but the reader witnesses the progress of a relationship that ends in Nile’s literal dissolution increases the shock-impact of the story. Carey might be using this as a device to stimulate his readers to reflect upon their own gender roles and love relationships. As an introduction, the reader learns about Nile’s peculiar habit of collecting dolls in order to mutilate them in a ceremonial way: “Those which still have hair she plucks bald, and those with eyes lose them, and those with teeth have them removed and she paints them, slowly, white” (84). During this violent ritual the dolls are de-feminized, and the white colour does not signify innocence but insignificance: “White […] has no appeal to her; it is simply that it says nothing” (85).

Nile’s destructive behaviour, which betokens her disturbed sense of femininity, introduces the problematic nature of gender. The confusion about gender intensifies when the narrator confesses that he does not like white: “I would prefer a nice blue […]. Something a little more feminine” (85). As the colour blue is traditionally chosen for a little boy and pink for a little girl, this statement is perplexing. Only after the narrator has expressed these preliminary thoughts does he describe the nature of his relationship to Nile, who keeps house for him and occasionally shares a meal. Soon the narrator confesses his desire to have sex with Nile at some point. When he describes how he will gradually ‘expose’ her, this metaphor does not signify the process of getting to know someone; rather, it suggests the narrator’s desire to seize hold of Nile:

> Then it will be time to move on to other more intimate things, moving layer after layer, until I discover her true colours, her flavours, her smells. The prospect of so slow an exploration excites me and I am in no hurry, no hurry at all. (85–86)

Hence Nile is an object of the narrator’s sexual fantasies, in which the timing and mode of the sexual encounter is his responsibility only. The narrator’s assaults on Nile are paralleled by assaults on the reader in the form of suggestive addresses. The situation escalates when Nile admits that she helps to perform illegal abortions. The narrator is not shocked about the activity as such, but at the fact that she did not obey the ‘adequate’ order: “It is bad. I had wished to take things slowly. […] But it is all coming too fast, all becoming too much” (89). Control seems to be the main theme; the narrator is obsessed with the ‘right’ timing and his delaying tactics. At the same time, he wants to assume power over Nile. The blatant contradiction between artificial distance and violent intimacy characterizes the notion of masculinity presented here. Rather than reducing the tempo, he loses control of himself: “I am doing what I had planned not to do: rush” (90).
While Nile keeps telling her secrets, the narrator undresses her, with increasing arousal. Eventually she sits in front of him, naked apart from an earring. Although Nile tries to defend herself, he drags at the piece of jewellery, which turns out to serve as a zip: “It is not, it would appear, an earring at all, but a zip or catch of some sort. As I pull, her face, then her breasts, peel away” (92). Suddenly a young man with her face and hair is revealed. Surprised by her own metamorphosis, “she takes her penis in her hand, curious, kneading it, watching it grow. I watch fascinated” (93). Here the metamorphosis is triggered by external force and leads to successive versions of the same person with different sex. The taboo subjects of masturbation and voyeurism are also brought into play. Male sexuality has a narcissistic or homoerotic aspect, “a displaced desire for a hidden male body, an awareness that rather than being biologically determined, gender identity is a culturally imposed demarcation which splits men off from their polymorphous potentialities.”

But a man cannot act out his homosexual or bisexual tendencies; instead, he is expected to have a single unequivocal sexuality.

When the narrator notices another earring, he tugs at it as well, and a girlish version of Nile wearing stockings and suspenders is revealed. A fantasy-woman is objectified, and her sexual availability is marked by these fetishes. When the narrator takes off her stockings, her legs dissolve; he grabs at her hair, which turns out to be a wig concealing a bald head. He accidentally drops her, and she falls into pieces: “There is a sharp noise, rather like a breaking glass. Bending down I discover among the fragments a small doll, hairless, eyeless, and white from head to toe” (93). At the end of the story, the narrator is confronted with a white doll, as if his own sexual fantasies had been invaded by the object of his obsessions.

“Peeling” is an ambiguous story: it could be read as “a deconstruction of male mythologies about women.” Nile’s identity in particular remains mysterious: Nile is not necessarily a real woman, but could also be the fantasy of an old and lonely man. Also, she could be a prostitute who at first submits to the client’s desires but then resists them. More questions remain: is Nile’s obsessive mutilation of dolls a symptom of her fear of being sexually abused by a man, thus ending up faceless and insignificant (like her dolls)? Could the sexual act, under certain conditions, have a similarly destructive effect – like an abortion? Or does the doll symbolize the sexual narrator’s disappointment at failing to gain a love relationship and sexual fulfilment despite his pornographic fantasies?

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36 Woodcock, Peter Carey, 31.
37 Woodcock, Peter Carey, 30.
The process of undressing could also be a metaphor for revealing different readings of the story. The initial warning that the relationship presented is beyond analysis could be a plea for the reader to have a try nevertheless. The relationship between the narrator and Nile would then stand not only for gender relations that have to be redefined – since traditional gender roles seem to be dissolving – but also for the changing relation between author and reader, which demands new reading strategies.

Conclusion

To read Peter Carey’s short stories as Lehrstücke, I would therefore argue, refutes Ryan–Fazilleau’s reproach that Carey deliberately leads his readers astray; rather, such a reading allows new insights into the reading and evaluation of Carey’s short stories. These stories, in which different variants of entrapment and their causes are presented, are brilliantly constructed tales which, although at first leading their readers into a narrative labyrinth, require them – if they are to escape that labyrinth – to assume a more critical stance. As Anthony Hassall puts it, “The bleakness of this vision, with its acute psychological insights and its compulsive zeroing in on primal fears, is not, however, unrelieved. There is also a celebration of the human spirit in travail.”38 And Carey himself indicates as much when he says, “I think the writer has a responsibility to tell the truth, not to shy away from the world as it is; and at the same time the writer has the responsibility to celebrate the potential of the human spirit.”39 The originality of Carey’s variations on the theme of entrapment lies in his capacity to blend fiction with reality, so that readers and characters seem to struggle ‘side by side’ for the victory of the “human spirit” over the restrictions imposed by our world.

Works Cited

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38 Hassall, Peter Carey’s Fiction, 2.
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As an artist Peter Carey has qualities in common with the protagonists of his fiction. He is a dare-devil, a dealer, an investigator, a spin-doctor, a phantom, an opportunist – a literary Houdini. Like two of his best creations – Harry Joy in *Bliss* and Herbert Badgery in *Illywhacker* – he is a prodigious storyteller and an insouciant borrower, embellishing his tales into fantastic designs. “I didn’t know that places like this even existed on the earth,” says a visitor to the emblematic architect’s house in *The Tax Inspector*. Many visitors to Carey’s fictions have had a similar response.

The dreams of genius are idiosyncratic, as difficult to achieve as they are breathtaking in conception. That is the author’s energizing risk as he writes back to Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* in *Jack Maggs* or tells the *True History of the Kelly Gang* in Ned Kelly’s own voice. Failure is factored into the wager excitingly as the underdog fiction-maker uses every trick of his trade to deliver himself from the task he has set. Carey re-treads and re-fits, like the used-car-dealing Catchprice family in *The Tax Inspector*. He shuffles the pack like Oscar and Lucinda. He aggregates the bricks of story – jokes, yarns, memories – in a stop–start rhythm that gives a sense of randomness to the way things build up or fall out. People and events combine and recombine like the tumble of a poker machine. Sometimes the pattern can feel deterministic, with elements colliding to maximum effect in well-timed farce. Harry Joy in *Bliss* literally ‘falls out’ of the tree from which he is spying, bringing

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him face to face (hanging upside down) with his family’s errant behaviour at the worst/best possible moment. It’s a richly stage-managed scene. Always the prose is dazzlingly adorned, often in an arbitrary way too, as ideas and images are caught seemingly from nowhere: Frieda Catchprice, the matriarch in The Tax Inspector, works up and down events “like a fly trying to find its way through glass to air” (42). In these tendencies we see Carey’s literary inheritance: the rediscovery of the sketch or partial vernacular story, from the Bulletin tradition of the 1890s, as refracted through the sensibility of Frank Moorhouse, Murray Bail, Michael Wilding and other 1970s contemporaries, and the fragmentary brocaded memorializing of Hal Porter, the proclaimed short-story master of the generation preceding Carey.

Escape is made possible by the arbitrariness of fiction in Carey’s writing. Cornered, he pushes invention to an extreme, sometimes overwinding the mechanism. Displacing conviction with laughter, he is willing to put the deal between writer and reader at risk. In the manic conclusion to 30 Days in Sydney, the narrator is with friends in a squat atop an office tower. In a suit “bought at Barney’s in New York” he crawls out on a ledge to save a chicken from falling to its death. The chook, “like a wound-up spring,” pecks him and makes him bleed. “Comrade Chook,” laughs his mate. “You did the comrade a favour, she had to peck you. She’s a Sydney chook, no worries.”

As Peter and his friends survey the ugliness of the “world-class city” below, the mess wrought by “the pollucicians and the developers,” they reflect on what has been lost from the pristine harbour and, by association, from the lost indigenous people. “Didn’t figure me for a blackfellow?” says a woman in the group by way of correction. “But we are everywhere amongst you […]. I’m a real truck-driving, post-modernist Koori” (211, 214–15). The woman exposes the assumptions of her sophisticated friends, but the moment is embarrassing more for the sly virtuosity with which it is inserted than for the insight it claims. Not everyone will buy it.

Is the world like this in any way that might have meaning for us, or is the game of reading, with all its spectacular pleasures, merely its own reward? What is this Spieler extraordinaire showing us? Carey’s fictions respond readily to postmodernist scepticism and to a taste for hybridity and genre instability. His work has generated a large volume of commentary in this vein. But what happens if we move on from such formalist interests to wonder what the performance is all about? The problem is encapsulated by Luke Slattery in a review of Carey’s latest novel, the pre-emptively titled My Life as a Fake: “The finished objects are of considerable artistry and questionable authen-

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ticity.” There’s a worry about being taken for a ride, even when the ride is highly entertaining.

The question becomes more pressing when the artistry depends on a pre-determined narrative of Australia from which the characters of the novels derive their destinies. How authentic is that? This novelist’s self-imposed task is to explain his characters by revealing what is hidden in their make-up by way of origins and lineage or in the unrealized dreams they can never escape. “When my past is dead, I am free as air,” says Benny Catchprice in *The Tax Inspector*, in dangerous pursuit of self-transformation (117). The author sympathizes with the glamour of those dreams, even while his irony exposes their futility.

Carey’s omniscient authorial inwardness can be duplicitous, a vehicle for disdain as characters are classified like insects:

> She hadn’t been quite so keen to become pregnant the second time. She was going to be a hot-shot. Each year she told herself that she was still young. And while she waited she became more American than the Americans. She supported their wars, saw their movies, bought their products, despised their enemies. Even their most trivial habits were adopted as articles of faith and there was always iced water on the table at Palm Avenue. She believed in the benevolence of their companies, the triumph of the astronauts, the law of the market-place and the twin threats of Communism and the second-rate, although not necessarily in that order. (100)

Bettina Joy in *Bliss* is one of Carey’s great tough unscrupulous women. Yet she is destined for a wasted, unfulfilled end too, as if in punishment for an inflated self-image.

Change of the most radical kind may be possible for Carey’s characters, but never the complete release from formative beginnings of history, geography, society and family that they wish for. For Benny Catchprice it’s the psychological legacy of sexual abuse, inscribed incestuously in his family down the generations. For Bettina Joy, latent advertising genius, it’s the carcinogenic inheritance of her family’s petrol station that catches up with her as she tries to escape into another life. In the author’s dark vision, such fates lie hidden beneath the sunny surface of Australian life as a buried doom, a repressed pain that merges with the long shadow of ‘the convict stain’ (cited on page 9 of *30 Days in Sydney*). The narrator’s friend protests: “You’re going to tell everyone how bent we are. I know this shit of yours. Convict colony, Rum Corps, etc., etc.” (153). Is Australia incidental to Carey’s deterministic fatalism, or is his world-view peculiarly Australian? He has claimed his birthright

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with protean elusiveness, as insider, subversive, and eccentric outsider. Exploring Australia, he displays both the élan of the metropolitan showman and the winking intimacy of someone writing for a handful of friends. But is he also, in this way, imprisoned as the fiction-maker of a ‘fatal shore’ where human possibilities are constricted?

Driving along Parramatta Road, home to many of Sydney’s car dealers, Carey’s mate says:

“Just ask yourself why the most important road in the colony would be filled with car yards. Come on, this is your family history, Pete. Didn’t your grandfather have a stables? Weren’t your family horse traders? Yes? Didn’t your grandad go on to taxis and T-model Fords? Well, this is how it was with the Parramatta Road. This is where the stables were, where the horse traders were […]. This was the only fucking road […]. These car yards are historic markers. I’d put a fucking brass plaque on every one […]. You gotta understand what is hidden.” (143–44)

The author puts a familiar and familial spin on Australia’s history, letting the ghosts walk abroad, making projections of himself its spectral delineation. He relishes what he embodies from it, however damaged or melancholy. His forensic capabilities confirm an inexorable chain of cause-and-effect that becomes the driver of his imagination.

By his success in writing about Australia in a certain way, Carey has come to represent his country on the literary map, as Margaret Atwood represents Canada and Salman Rushdie India. He may not have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, as Patrick White did in 1973, and no book of his may have sold as many copies as Colleen McCullough’s bestseller *The Thorn Birds* (1977), but Carey is Australia’s exemplar of world recognition. In this he makes triumphant amends for two significant predecessors – Henry Lawson, who was broken by the attempt to make it in London and died in poverty and neglect on the streets of Sydney, and Christina Stead, the price of whose long-term expatriation was that she wrote directly about Australia hardly at all. But Carey’s representative ascendency, for all its advantages, is also awkward and unenviable, perhaps especially for a democrat and republican. He has been designated rather than elected. The spruiking author presses on us his fictional rendering of the world and meets resistance when the reader knows that world differently. Carey persuades from the position of one who has escaped. “I have a lifetime of turning my back on painful memories,” the narrator confesses in *30 Days in Sydney* (42). But he escapes only to be compelled to return again. He needs to be a real chameleon to get away with that.

Carey’s Australia, as seen in the Preamble to a Republican Constitution that he produced in 2003, is a forced melding of the contradictory narratives of its people:
We are [...] a nation forged by prisoners in chains [...] forever determined by these circumstances [...]. We are a nation [...] made by people whose ancestors gambled everything [...] who abandoned everything familiar to reach this continent [...]. Given the experience of unfairness and persecution that mark the lifelines of our individual histories, we are forever determined to nurture and uphold the liberties of our fellow citizens [...] who proudly stand side by side, inseparable beneath the Southern Cross.4

Carey’s Preamble is a deterministic account of a society in which the past is forever present in gamblers’ laments and dreamers’ aspirations. That is his construct of Australia.

I am a decade younger than Peter Carey (b. 1943) and I have watched his brilliant career with appreciation and pride, even as I have diverged from him in my sense of how to be an Australian writer. He is the classic baby boomer, and his generation of writers, publishers, agents and critics re-invented the possibilities of Australian literature: David Malouf (b. 1934), Rodney Hall (b. 1935), Frank Moorhouse (b. 1938), Les Murray (b. 1938), Barbara Hanrahan (1939–91), Murray Bail (b. 1941), Roger McDonald (b. 1941), Rosemary Creswell (b. 1941), Beverley Farmer (b. 1941), Hilary McPhee (b. 1941), Di Gribble (b. 1942), Helen Garner (b. 1942), David Williamson (b. 1942), Drusilla Modjeska (b. 1946) and Don Watson (b. 1949), to name various of the stayers. University of Queensland Press published the first books of quite a few of those writers, including Carey’s The Fat Man in History in 1974 and War Crimes in 1979. I remember picking them up when they first came out. UQP published my own first book of stories, The Possession of Amber, in 1980, at the tail end of a decade that had liberated Australian creativity in many areas. Peter Carey broke new ground with speculative short fiction that was edgy, unrhetorical, politically charged. It was received as a local version of the fabulism or magical realism that was a popular import from non-Anglo-Saxon cultures at the time. Carey credited Kafka, Beckett and Borges. Gabriel García Márquez’s novel One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967; first published in English in 1970) was another influence. Paradoxically, this was all part of a nationalist literary project that was happening a generation after Vance Palmer recognized in the original magical realist, Alejo Carpentier, a way for Australian fiction to break from the shackling domination of literary London, the old imperial centre. After reading Carpentier’s The Lost Steps (1953; first published in English in 1956), Palmer wrote:

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The last great novel I read [...] was written by a Cuban born in Havana. I think Australia at present should occupy itself with cultivating its own garden, and that when it is a matter of making outside contacts it should pay more attention to the new channels of communication that have been opened up with Asia and America.

– South as well as North. In Carpentier’s novel, a church constructed deep in the jungle prompts questions that reach back beyond the clash of Old World and New World in a baroque fusion of colonizing and indigenous existence. *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass appeared a couple of years later in Germany and was another influential grafting of the fantastical and the grotesque onto realism as a way of representing impacted political histories. Working in a context prepared by such influences, Carey finds his writing self in historical pastiche and a postmodern, postcolonial narrating of classic national stories from the past, real or imagined.

Close enough in time to those pioneers of the 1970s to be fascinated and inspired by their example, I was also distant by a significant decade. In terms of birth year, it meant the difference between those born in the 1940s and those born in the 1950s, between a time of isolation and fear (“The Japanese [...] were coming to take my little baby,” Carey recalls his mother saying in small-town Victoria) and a time when people were free to travel again (many immediately took off – including my parents, who were in London when I was born in 1952). The long expansion of education, opportunity and leisure had begun. The period from 1945 saw substantial migration to Australia, including many non-English-speaking people, and the beginnings of what would be embraced as multiculturalism when the children of that period grew up. I detect differences between the generation of the 1940s and the generation of the 1950s in attitudes towards the passing of the old monocultural Australia under the pressure of those demographic changes, with my own generation being more enthusiastic about cultural diversity. As Prime Minister,

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8 *30 Days in Sydney*, 219.
John Howard (four years older than Carey) represents the 1940s view. In order that people today may feel “relaxed and comfortable,” Howard has made selective play of turning the clock back, reworking monocultural themes, especially military traditions and other national legends that are supposed to be continuous with the old pre-World War II Australia. It’s a nationalistic simulation (and simplification) that satisfies some.

For me in 1980, the national was already less simple and less pressing than it appeared to be in work by the older literary nationalists of the 1970s, who were the big boys in a mostly male yard. The reality in which I found myself, when, rather than escape, I returned to Australia in 1978 after graduate study abroad, seemed full of different, more complex and unexplored potential identities. Into this came Bliss (1981), packaged in silver by UQP, Peter Carey’s first published novel. It was addressed to the world we lived in and was an immediate hit: bright, zesty and atmospheric; a classic piece of contemporary fiction. It set a pattern for the author. People argued about it around dinner tables. It won prizes. It was made into a film. I don’t suppose it has ever been out of print. To tell the truth, when it first appeared, and friends pushed it on me, it failed to engage my interests. I like it more now, appreciating its sharp charm and uneasy equilibrium.

Bliss opens with the moment in which Harry Joy, middle-aged advertising executive, escapes his life. He lies apparently dead on a suburban lawn while another version of himself (his transmigrating soul?) floats calmly above the scene like a hot-air balloon. The image is surreal, emblematic, technicolor, while the writing has a copybook realist precision (no adverbs):

His straight grey hair, the colour of an empty ashtray, hangs over one eye.
And, although no one seems to have noticed it, a cigarette still burns between two yellowed fingers, like some practical joke known to raise the dead.9

There is the lyrical melancholic humour of John Cheever or Richard Ford, attending with care to a middle world of middling people. Bliss is Carey’s most American novel.

The first paragraph also arrestingly declares the smart conceit that will run through the novel: “Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him.” How do we take these differently dead-pan words, delivered with the Irish tone of Beckett or Flann O’Brien and a twist on the more exalted literary language of Dylan Thomas’s “after the first death, there is no other”? Here, after the first death, there is

reincarnation and reinvention. Even as the passage goes on with nostalgic realism to describe the scene from the air—

the blue jewelled bay eating into what had once been a coastal swamp, the long meandering brown river, the quiet streets and long boulevards planted with mangoes, palms, flame trees, jacarandas [...] and the decaying stuccoed houses of shopkeepers [...] and the dust rose from gravel roads and whirled in small eddies in the Sunday evening air

– it comes to rest on metaphysics: “He recognized the worlds of pleasure and worlds of pain, bliss and punishment, Heaven and Hell” (12). Here, introducing the idea of bliss that floats over the novel (rather oddly – the title was an afterthought10), Carey sketches a punitive moral framework that derives from Calvinist Christianity and appears throughout his writing in themes of guilt, entrapment, damnation, reward and release. The world is Hell unless you can get out of it.

For Vish Catchprice in The Tax Inspector, a later novel of contemporary Australia, the day-to-day world of business “is hell” (234). In the city, “the angels are not winning” (202). That’s because Sydney “is the only big city in the world that was established by convicts on the one side and bent soldiers on the other” (186). People were trapped then as they are trapped now: “They didn’t want to be stuck there,” Jack Catchprice says of his family, “but by the time they realized it they had no other choices. The environment affects you” (198). That’s what Benny Catchprice is raging against: “you cannot trap us in our pasts.” But even as he believes he is escaping, he is returning to another cycle of the same hell. “You’re not an angel, you’re an insect,” his brother insists. “You’ll live and die an insect, a million times over” (182).

In a jetlagged nightmare in 30 Days in Sydney the narrator, Peter, links eternity to hell, recalling James Joyce’s hellfire sermon in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, as he imagines what it felt like for those transported to the hell of Australia – “such a place of punishment” – for the term of their natural lives. Even from the imagining of it there is no escape: “Typically I imagined the ocean but this Australian ocean was no escape. It was endless, relentless, merciless” (80).

These later developments are foreshadowed in Bliss, but things are not yet so bad for Harry Joy. He discovers that his life is indeed Hell but he is already out of it, or at least free to dip in and out. The metaphysics sit lightly on the novel as a satirical device, not to be taken too seriously. The betrayals and obsessions of these small-time late-twentieth-century Australians are balanced

by their energy and manic lust for life. Even the political association of Evil with Australia’s infatuated dependency on the American Empire and the spread of corporations such as cancer-causing Krappe Chemicals, under the slick veneer of American-style advertising, is a source of narrative invention and comedy above all. Second-hand mantras are lampooned (“money plus anger equals success,” 193) and there’s ambivalent sympathy for the dreams that make people slaves, the American dreams helplessly inherited by Australians: “It was the bigness,” Harry Joy’s son wanted to talk to his father about, “the ill-defined promised land of his future […] where there was South America, New York […] in all his dreams about the future he had added this element of Gatsby with his big house, alone, looking across the bay at night” and “in his dream […] there […] was Harry Joy” (200–201) – just as in Harry’s own life-dream loomed the figure of his own travelling, storytelling American father.

*Bliss* is an affectionate satire of people who enjoy being what they are while also stirring with a restless urge to become something else. Set in a magical zone on the North Coast of New South Wales, the novel gives wry expression to a particular historical moment when the ‘counterculture’ pushed back against the mainstream in the conviction that the society’s existing way of life was terminally diseased. It was a time of alternative life-styles, New Age teachings and therapies and radical environmentalism, of new thinking that was inseparable from edenic or utopian dreaming. In Carey’s cosmology in *Bliss*, as in so much traditional, especially Christian, lore, a green paradisal vision offers escape from the infernal prison of the world.

With Honey Barbara, his bush spirit, Harry Joy breeds children, tells stories and makes the world new. At the same time, he recovers for his motley, displaced people their full inheritance as human beings, reintegrating them harmoniously with a world from which they have been alienated up to now, making a blissful longevity from an eternity of hell: “He was merely sewing together the bright patchworks of lives, legends, myths, beliefs, hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a richer glow to all their lives” (290–91). It is a fantasy ending to a spiritual fairytale, a storyteller’s manifesto as well as a spin-doctor’s. I am even reminded of Prime Minister Howard in Harry’s efforts to make something “they all felt comfortable with. They were hungry for ceremony and story. There was no embarrassment in these new constructions” (291). It does not matter what the ties are, as long as they bind.

Rhetorical, escapist and fanciful, the ending of *Bliss* is necessary to the book’s poise. It balances the extremes of satire even as it exposes the satirist’s

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weakness: sentimentality floods in when savagery lifts. In its paean to indigenous nature, for example, there is no pause for the indigenous people who might have a stronger, more political claim to a place in this romantic idyll. That awareness must wait for Illywhacker.

In Bliss, if the happy ending lacks authenticity, the underworld of the mental asylum is far-fetched, the plotting excessive, and the overarching conceit unsustained, Carey is so close to his material that moment by moment he convinces us. Who else could write with such honed attention? “She rocked back and forth in her squeaking chair while fish swam in the aquarium behind her head and she played churches and steeples with her short-fingered hands” (169). Where else is this author so open to eroticism and lyrical freedom?

And then, in one smooth acrobatic motion that seemed to take ten slow, oiled minutes to achieve, like two snakes entwining, she took his penis into her and smiled as he shut his eyes and gasped softly. She nestled her lips into his ear as he entered her (lips into a shell, lips into a rose), and as the slow long strokes began she talked her spell. (180)

In the novel’s account of a life crisis, the elements that threaten to spin out of control – exaggeration, discontinuity, anxious analytical superfluity – are sheeted back to the mundane world by a sense of scale and an openness to the ordinary and the known. There is little of the celebrated ventriloquism that takes over later novels.12 In the end, Harry Joy may be a cipher, the next in a long line of vehicles for his author’s virtuosity, but as he floats above his world and his own life the sense of his dilemmas is vividly felt. In Helen Daniel’s phrase, the hero occupies “the middle ground.”13 Other laws than those of fiction apply to him, and a mix of specific pleasures and pains is available for him. He’s one of us, a local Hamlet, crawling between heaven and earth, a middling man in the middle of his existence.

For whatever reasons, Peter Carey has not returned to the territory of Bliss. In his next book, Illywhacker, he became a national novelist, conscious of the two-way pull or play between the metropolitan centre (London, New York) and an Australia conceived in terms of national myths and literary strategies. “The whole nation is based on a lie,” declares Herbert Badgery emblematically, identifying and, by implication, justifying that well-spring of Carey’s

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12 “I could get from the world no bigger compliment,” Carey told the journalist Susan Wyndham when the real-life model for the voice of Sarah Wode–Douglass, the narrator of My Life as a Fake, found no fault with his mimicry; “For My Next Trick…,” Sydney Morning Herald (26 July 2003): 4–5.

creativity. “Carey’s fiction […] exploits the generative power of mendacity,” writes Graham Huggan. “There is a risk involved; but then Carey […] has always been adept at taking risks.” The lie and the gamble are where Carey goes after Bliss. A conscience-troubled man-in-the-middle no longer, he coolly rejoices in the transcendent untrustworthiness of novel-writing.

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Deceptive Constructions

The Art of Building in Peter Carey’s Illywhacker

BRIAN EDWARDS

The Engineer and the Bricoleur

He built like a jazz musician. He restated and reworked the melody of the old emporium. The creaking galleries were gone now, but you saw them still, in your imagination. He built like a liar, like a spider—steel ladders and walkways, catwalks, cages in mid-air, in racks on walls, tumbling like waterfalls, in a gallery spanning empty spaces like a stainless Bridge of Sighs.¹

DUCATED BY HERBERT BADGERY in the “trickery and deception” (547) of a city, Hissao the builder adds dissimulation and parody to his inheritance of the ‘Australian’ skill in improvisation. When Illywhacker ends with the reconstruction in Sydney, “city of illusions” (597), of “the best pet shop in the world,” financed by Japanese money, designed by Hissao, and exhibiting its Australians (shearers, lifesavers, inventors, manufacturers, bushmen, Aboriginals, artists, and writers) in cages, it re-focuses a leading metaphor in Carey’s text. Combining the idea of Australians on display with the idea of building, and text, as products of ‘bricolage’,² this novel

¹ Peter Carey, Illywhacker (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1985): 597. Further page references are in the main text. The image is self-reflexive of the text’s characteristic artifice, its negotiations between the notionally empirical and the imaginary, between historical-cultural details and the play of language and imagination upon them.

pet-shop (and the novel as pet-shop) presents the double play of parody together with its postmodernist pastiche of early twentieth-century Australian history. As hindsight with difference, it is an exercise in refiguring tradition, with inventive duplicity. If Badgery’s improvisatory prowess signifies the national skill in making do with materials at hand, *Illywhacker* is a literary equivalent: writing as the canny embezzlement of other writing or the text as a tissue of messed-about quotations. It renovates history by opening constructions of the past to new building regulations more in line with John Barth’s funhouse and the Bonaventure Hotel than with the dun-coloured offspring of traditional realism.

Hissao’s innovatory practice, building “like a liar, like a spider,” appeals to the imagination. It recalls Barthes’ definition of the pleasure of the text as a composition in the making:

> “Text” means “Tissue”; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving: lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web.3

Barthes’ emphasis upon construction as a process of making and unmaking, or displacement and difference, coincides with Derrida’s description of de-centering – “We will therefore not return to dissemination as if it were the centre of the web”4 – and Carey’s big book makes play with the traditional ‘Australian’ inheritance offering a decentred structure that favours ingenuity in building detail. Herbert Badgery’s preoccupation with building houses is analogous to building the historical text and old preoccupations with constructing a national consciousness. Each is tacked together, a construction composed of bits and pieces, borrowings, multi-cultural detritus – an exercise in bricolage. In postmodernist terms, the postcolonial imperative must recognize difference and, addressing the historical “subject,” Carey and Murray Bail, in Australia, find opportunity to acknowledge and displace the processes of national caricature.5

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3 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (Le plaisir du texte, 1973; New York: Hill & Wang, 1975): 64. The image has many connections – with Derrida’s attention to language and writing, Wolfgang Iser’s notion of textual meaning as a cooperative product involving the reader, and such famous literary emphasis on weaving/making as we find in *The Odyssey* and *Moby Dick*.
5 The debate and the constructions are international, of course, and I have elsewhere discussed Canadian examples, in particular, in addition to the Australian context. See
Murray Bail: Unsettling National Markers

Murray Bail’s forays into great Australian traditions help to particularize the modes of play in Carey’s renovations and, as introduction, I wish to refer briefly to Bail’s “The Drover’s Wife,” Homesickness, and Holden’s Performance. Like Carey, Bail depends upon connections and the factor of difference, offering literary texts that acknowledge cultural history not as the past fixed in place but, rather, as a continuing field of play in which the moves may be simultaneously comic and serious, entertaining and revisionist. His texts serve as a most useful foil for reading Carey’s deconstructive approach to ‘history’.

Paying court to Henry Lawson’s icon of the bush tradition, and to Russell Drysdale’s painting “The Drover’s Wife” is a proliferation of texts which, taken together, question the currency not of Lawson’s story nor of Drysdale’s painting, but of constructions of representativeness imposed upon them. In its artifice, in replacing the omniscient narrator with “Gordon,” Adelaide dentist, who has lost “Hazel” to a drover, it draws attention to cultural semiotics and reading frames in a spirit of playful dissimulation. It is a form of play whose critical effect depends on the reader’s appreciation of Lawson’s text and its revered place in Australian literature and in constructions of the bush tradition. This deconstructive unsettling of national markers is encountered again in Homesickness, most notably in the absurdist heterogeneity of its band of thirteen tourists abroad. Differentiated by name, status, speech, and sexual preference, they are ‘multicultural’, heterosexual and homosexual, hedonistic and ascetic, brash and introverted, humourless and comic, but ‘Australian’. Self-consciously ridiculous their museum-hopping international grand tour may be, in its bizarre emphasis on ‘Australian’ graffiti, artefacts, and values as measures of nostalgia and of worth, but there is the disturbing implication that, amidst the fun, the parody strikes a mark. The checklist satires is polished as well as inventive, and, as Don Anderson suggests, Homesickness “delights in its own ludics potentialities.” Its profusion of naming becomes, paradoxically, an exercise in unnaming, and, against homogeneity, the text

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presents a persuasive case for difference. As the tourists are moved from Africa to England, South America, the USA and Russia, it is increasingly apparent that they are the exhibit – a travelling exhibition – and that not only national identity but character itself is held to be a provisionals construct, a product of choices from a mobile range of possibilities. It is not so much a case of reality resisting attempts to represent it in language as that the ‘real’ is what we construct and apprehend in language. In tourism, Bail emphasizes the passing parade and the question of perspective: “The tourist keeps going, one leg after the other, or stands waiting, queued. You embody the Human Condition. Stop. Keep going. Searching. For what? It is always a grand sight.”8 So, as Barthes suggests, “lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself”9 and “the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation.”10

Along the way, in Homesickness, the proliferation of slogans, quips and allusions denotes opportunities for play with language and culture against the gravity of identities and ending. And, because the figures constitute so varied a raid on images from Australian popular culture, they provide not simply a comic iconography, but also a critique of ideological processes. The ‘innocent’ third-person narratives simultaneously invites and targets readers – welcomed to the display of tourists on parade, alerted to the mobility of signifiers and to their mismatches with whole truth, we may recognize our complicity in the construction and transmission of emblems. What sharper suggestion of the mobility and reach of signs, their insufficiency and their tenacity, than this exchange as the travellers are about to leave a remote African village:

Mrs Cathcart bent down before getting in.
“And what’s this little tacker’s name?”
The boy pointed to himself:
“Oxford University Press.”
“She means your name,” Doug put in, encouraging.
The boy nodded.
“Oxford University Press.”
“That’s nice. Doug, give him a coin. What would you like to be, dear, when you grow up?”
The boy looked up at Mrs Cathcart. The driver began revving the four-cylinder engine.
“A tourist.” (52)

9 Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 64.
10 Barthes, S/Z, 11.
When the travels end, with the tourists gathered in a completely bare museum lit by harsh white light, Bail underscores the text’s elaborations on centrism and decentering, cultural formations and discontinuity, movement and return: “Gradually, standing quietly, they began to see themselves. Possibilities included the past and the near future” (317). In its ludic attention to cultural markers and to matters of connection and transformations, *Homesickness* offers a view of culture and identity as networks of discursive formations, as shifting and shifty constructions that invite intervention.

*Holden’s Performance* maintains this parodic exploration of cultural markers while narrowing the geographical range. Reliable enough, mechanical, home-grown and dull, a figure of the car whose name he bears, Holden Shadbolt is an Australia’s Own Product whose travels are confined to Adelaide, Sydney and Canberra, where human conduct is influenced by the city grid and Bail’s artful lessons in geometry sacrifice the intricacies of mathematics to the invective of cultural commentary. Holden’s moves – from the straight lines of Adelaide’s “puritanical streets” and the “logic of plain thinking”\(^{11}\) to Sydney’s irregularities, and to Canberra, where national power is “reinforced by a psycho-geometric townplan of lawned circles and spokes, parliaments and palaces at the end of perfectly straight vistas” (215) – are somnambulistic changes in direction. They prescribe this automaton’s progress as a comic exercise in cultural analysis. Adelaide-trained on a high-fibre diet of ground galley proofs of the *Advertiser*, Holden’s photographic memory and unblinking reliability suit not only the black-and-white world of Manly’s Epic Theatre but also, in turn, his position as watchful chauffeur to the Minister for the Interior and his selection for Colonel Light’s training squad of unobtrusive bodyguards to the Prime Minister. Flat by comparison with Uncle Vern, Frank McBee, Alex Screech and Sid Hoadley, and emblem of the great Australian blankness in his inarticulate and uncritical passage, Holden is a negative figure, one part of a national caricature presented against the absurdist cartography of Bail’s cityscapes and three decades or so of very reduced cultural history. This Australia is a place of distances, sprawl, and odd collisions, in which human conduct is a product of geomorphic detail and the operations of chance:

This problem of emptiness in vast space … it allowed, extremes of simplicities and acts of God. Dry old continent, flat as a board. With few obstacles to slow down and give texture to a thought, to deeds and to speech itself, angles of chance could intersect with little interruption, without explanation; a paradise for the gambler and fatalist.

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The straight line had been introduced to superimpose some sort of order; an illusion of order. (350)

Whereas the gambler dices with chance, and the fatalist has considered possibilities against predetermination, Holden’s performance is an unreflective procession, the mechanical ideal of a reliable engine:

*Ability to idle all day. Slight overheating.*
*Stand for hours in the sun. No complaints.*
*Can go all day on a meat pie.* (353)

But Bail’s text, in its reflectiveness, subverts the dominant conceit, displacing *by placing* the totalizing figure of the engineering marvel. It uses the metaphor of the engineer to unpick it, and the processes recall Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss’s oppositional figures:

If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*. The engineer, whom Lévi-Strauss opposes to the *bricoleur* should be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense the engineer is a myth. A subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it “out of nothing,” “out of whole cloth,” would be the creator of the verb, the verb itself. The notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Lévi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur.*

Dismantling notions of origin and priority, and decentering authority by emphasizing limitation, difference and interplay, Derrida’s argument obliterates neither ‘engineer’ nor ‘bricoleur’ but, rather, practises claiming privilege in unity. Constructed from a heritage “which is more or less coherent or ruined,” Bail’s mechanistic model is the engineering product of a bricoleur’s discourse. As the figures of engineer and bricoleur are interdependent, each a supplement that complicates the other, so too in Bail’s play with Holden as a marker within cultural traditions more interesting in their heterogeneity than for figures that reduce the critical difference.

In these texts, Bail offers postmodernist visitations upon cultural history, constructions that acknowledge ‘Australia’ in its dividedness by putting the signs on display as signs. There is slippage within operations of the sign, a language game, which, displayed, draws attention to naming more as a play of

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differences than a matching of equivalences. In “The Drover’s Wife,” Homesickness and Holden’s Performance, it is the self-consciousness of Bail’s presentation of the markers, and the rituals, that invites readers to consider not only their pertinence to Australian cultural traditions but also their attraction as items of play. The same may be said of his primary conceit in the later novel Eucalyptus as the antipodean Prospero assesses his daughter’s suitors according to their appreciation of trees. I read this as self-consciousness based not on identity and independence but, rather, on incertitude and the positive recognition of provisionality. In such a construction, as Derrida argues often, meaning involves play: “play includes the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in terms of knowledge, but in terms of inscrip-

The Architect of Illusion

In Illywhacker, the figure of building foregrounds the idea of construction as bricolage. I have suggested that this emphasis on process, hence on the product in its plurality and dividedness, indicates the play in postmodernism. By displaying scaffolding, or layers, or cultural accretions, in the metonymic slide between building and text, it opens the building/text to inspections mindful of artifice and ontological concerns. The invitations alert readers to the challenges of reading against completion, to reading as a game in which the rules can shift, styles of play are important, and all results are provisional – which is not to deny the operations of power in the discourse. Discussing “the social construction of (un)reality” in his study of postmodernist fiction, Brian McHale uses the building metaphor as a definitional figure:

it is precisely by foregrounding the skeleton of layers […] that postmodernist fiction achieves its aesthetic effects and sustains interest, in the process modeling the complex ontological landscape of our experience.

Acknowledging cultural markers in ways that also interrogate their reliability as measures of identity, Bail’s texts are examples of urbanely self-conscious

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14 While acknowledging Linda Hutcheon’s emphasis on a “mimesis of process” in metafiction (narcissistic narrative), it is also necessary to attend to the “product” – albeit in its instability as “process” – within this exchange model of textual negotiation. See Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (London: Methuen, 1984): 5.
postmodernist writing. They deconstruct the identikit. Sharing this interest in
the Australian heritage and the ways of cultural definition, Peter Carey pro-
vides in *Illywhacker* the special duplicity (and challenge) of a narrator whose
particular talent is lying. Spieler, con-man, bullshit-artist, Herbert Badgery is
a figure of the writer as trickster; his story is an artful version of twentieth-
century Australian history – past-ness refigured according to new building
specifications or cultural cartography of a postmodernist turn. In the following
discussion, I argue that Carey’s representation, in Badgery, of the author as
bricoleur exemplifies the play in postmodernist construction by featuring
positive possibilities that are in collusion against totalities.

“Call me Ishmael” is the invitation to a journey composed not just of
passing strange adventure but of considerable craft in the switching rhetoric of
its telling. It is not just that Melville’s narrator is given to disappearances and
returns, but that the grand project is tricked out (re-presented) in such a parade
of styles that linguistic play subverts simple identity and the critical difference
is brought forward in this presentation of ‘speech’ as writing. It is immedi-
ately apparent that “My name is Herbert Badgery” (11) is closer to Melville’s
model than to the “David Copperfield kind of crap” from which Salinger’s
Holden Caulfield attempts to distinguish his introduction, and difference. 16
When *Illywhacker* begins by declaring itself the work of a con-man who adds
that he is 139 years old, growing tits, addicted to lying and relieved to have
found an outlet (this novel) for his special talent, the reader is bludgeoned
about the artifice of narration and instructed to enjoy the performance: “my
advice is to not waste your time with your red pen, to try to pull apart the
strands of lies and truth, but to relax and enjoy the show” (11). Characteristic
of postmodernist textuality, this dissembling about ‘truth’ or, rather, its rejec-
tion as the ideal of a God-authored system, opens the way to multifarious and
self-conscious story-making. Against THE WORD, words are unleashed, liars
are licensed, History receives a deconstructive shot, and the past can be
fashioned as not just a source-book for narrative but as the product itself of
narrative constructions. Carey’s narrator is street-smart, a wandering part-time
car salesman and survivor educated in the school of hard knocks, whose book
learning post-dates experiences as aviator, salesman, builder and theatrical
performer, whose gaol term allows time for a BA by correspondence, and
whose lover tells him, in a reaffirmation of the duplicity of character and text:
“‘You have invented yourself, Mr Badgery, and that is why I like you. You
are what they call a confidence man. You can be anything you want’” (91). In
further signals of this text’s redeployment with difference of received narra-
tives of Australian culture, the cast is an assembly of yarn-spinners, aspiring

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poets, epistoleans and novelists. Collectively, they advertise the telling, providing evidence of the irresistible attractions of lying. Having before him such examples of the poet as his wife Phoebe, history mistress Annette Davidson, and Horace Dunlop the Rawleigh’s man, this trio of odd interlacings, the “King of Liars” concludes that poets “sit like spiders in the centre of their pretty webs” (204). Had Carey’s Badgery read Barthes’ reference to the subject unmaking himself in writing “like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web”? But it is via ‘poem’ as an instructive figure, and the metonymic play between writing and building, that Illywhacker foregrounds its deceptive constructions. “But now I know,” says the lying narrator as he constructs a cage for the king parrot, “a poem can take any form, can be a sleight of hand, a magician’s trick, be built from string and paper, fish or animals, bricks and wire” (201)

Phoebe’s great poem was not built from words, but from corrugated iron and chicken wire. She did not even build it herself but had me, her labourer, saw and hammer and make it for her. She had me rhyme a cage with a room, a bird with a person, feathers with skin, my home with a gaol. (205)

It is a small shift to prose and to the involvement of three generations of Badgerys in their changing construction of “the best pet shop in the world” with its caged Australiana on display, sustained at first by American dollars and finally by its new owners, the Mitsubishi Company. In this liars’ tradition, builders are inventive:

Spawned by lies, suckled on dreams, infested with dragons, my children could never have been normal, only extraordinary. Had they enjoyed the benefits of books and distinguished visitors they might have grown as famous as they deserved […]. But as it was they had no books, no brainy visitors. They made their futures in the same way that people fossicking in a tip must build a life, from the materials that come to hand. They made their philosophies from fencing wire and grew eccentrically. (359)

The images recall Vance Joy, Harry’s absent father, inspiration and muse, from Carey’s earlier novel Bliss. It is in tip-fossicking Vance that Harry finds his pattern and the Joys their bohemian notoriety, their difference: “Seen fossicking at the tip they were granted the right to eccentricity normally given only to aristocrats.” Suckled on stories, Harry Joy much prefers his father’s to those he heard in church “about Heaven and Hell and the tortures of Jesus”

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(15). In particular, Vance tells of New York, “most beautiful and terrible city on earth,” which after the next flood will provide its secular lesson, “a bible of buildings, a much better bible, a holy place which only the very learned will know how to read” (18). So there is a talent required not only of builders, working “from the materials that come to hand,” but also of interpreters. And in their repetitions of the figure, the texts provide playful readers’ guides, cryptic invitations to tip-fossicking that simultaneously hold the connection between building houses, texts and identity while affirming tricks, illusion, conceits and discontinuities as measures of the art.

But with such emphasis on the liar’s art and the artifice of buildings, what connections are there between Carey’s text, which begins so ostentatiously with the lie, and popular versions of Australian cultural history? Italo Calvino’s Marco Polo builds fantastic constructions in words, and they exist not in stone and timber but as invisible cities of the imagination, confined to language and to new reading configurations: “Only in Marco Polo’s accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing.”18 In The Castle of Crossed Destinies, the stories his travellers build from tarot symbols may touch upon familiars from world literature, but this pictorial mode of narrative construction also displaces all cultural grounds. There is a significant difference between Calvino’s art of building, in these collections, and Pynchon’s ‘zone’ in Gravity’s Rainbow, which Brian McHale holds as “paradigmatic for the heterotopian space of postmodernist writing”:

As the novel unfolds, our world and the “other world” mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations and fantasies become real, metaphors become literal, the fictional worlds of the mass media – the movies, comic-books – thrust themselves into the midst of historical reality. The zone, in short, becomes plural:

Isn’t this an “interface” here? a meeting surface for two worlds […] sure, but which two? (45)

Although one may quibble with McHale’s “real,” it is the case that in Pynchon’s zone the collection of cultural paraphernalia – place names, events, film, song, books, people – colludes with the fictitious in subversion of its own reliability not as historical reference but as sign of the actual. Pynchon’s text effectively disassembles History. Carey’s building strategies in Illywhacker fall between Calvino’s world-conjuring and Pynchon’s deployment of the “real” as fantastic. Exploiting the licence for dissimulation created by

Badgery as ebullient and unreliable narrator, the text deals in trickery; on the other hand, its style of geographic and cultural reference situates events within a colourful version of early-twentieth-century culture, a traveller’s progress in which the cartography mixes textbook exactitude with an Illywhacker’s flair for invention. From details of Geelong, Colac, Ballarat, Bacchus Marsh, and Melbourne, to the Mallee and to Sydney, and with reference to early aviation, conscription, religious issues, the model-T Ford, travelling theatricals, the 1930s depression, political movements and changes in national commercial relationships, Carey offers the surprise of the known defamiliarized by particularity and story. The results fulfil an epigraph’s promise, the quotation from Twain:

Australian history […] does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises and adventures, the incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened. (7)

The interplay of ‘lies’ and ‘truth’ is not only a demonstration of the con-man’s art, evidence of the instabilities of rhetoric and skills of persuasion. Allowing for recognitions, for ‘truths’, by situating the narrative in Australian history, it also invites reconsideration of that inheritance by emphasizing opportunities for interpretation. Whether the building materials consist of the mud and wire netting, wooden crates, and galvanized iron of Herbert Badgery’s obsession with houses, or of the words of his storytelling, the emphasis on ‘architecture’ dismantles the product. Claiming the privileged narrative space and freedom of the “liar’s art” (11), “enthusiasm” as his great talent in life (158) and his “salesman’s sense of history” (343), narrator Badgery’s rush of storytelling embodies Carey’s deconstructive play with local history. In Book 1, for example, names of cities, towns, streets, buildings and institutions proliferate like old familiars, with such cultural markers as Victoria’s Western District squattocracy, Geelong’s private schools and the city’s class consciousness, the Geelong Advertiser, the Shearers’ Strike, debates on the rabbit issue, Ford motor cars, the mountains of north-east Victoria (Timbertop country), Ballarat’s hotels, and Melbourne’s street grid and its cultural spaces lacing the invented with interpolations of the real. This is the author Carey who lived in Bacchus Marsh, was a boarder at Geelong Grammar School and a frequent enough visitor to Ballarat and to Melbourne revisiting with parodic invention the ambiguous attractions of those familiar sites, displaced in time together with some of the narratives of their (de)construction. History mistress Annette Davidson and student Phoebe McGrath are located at the Hermitage Church of England Girls’ Grammar School, sister institution to Geelong Grammar School during Carey’s student days and, like the boys’ school, associated with
Western District squatters, wealth, privilege and Englishness. Hardly representing old landed wealth as the daughter of a former bullocky and an ex-barmaid, Phoebe’s emergence as a beauty gives an edge to her transgressions:

The boys from College and Grammar not only seemed to overcome their distaste for her vulgar background, but gave her presents of school scarves. And when the anxiously awaited invitations to the prestigious end-of-year dances began, at last, to arrive, slipped into the green-felt letter rack, to be collected and displayed like trophies on study walls, the little “horror” had more than her share. But by then Annette (cautious, careful Annette) had taken the house in Villamente Street, West Geelong, and Phoebe gave not a fig for the Manisides or Chirnfolds or the Osters or any of the other social luminaries of the Western District. She attended no dances and created a perfect scandal by tearing up an invitation to the Geelong Grammar School dance, before witnesses. She might as well have spat in the altar wine. (15)

There is a Villamante Street in West Geelong; Manifold, Chirnside and Austin are among those names from the Western District; Hermitage girls attended Geelong College and Geelong Grammar dances; the parody reinvents a history. Similarly, Herbert Badgery’s perambulations and flights are set upon a landscape of specific cultural signs – Melbourne Road, Ryrie Street, Malop Street, Kardinia Park, Belmont Common, Barwon Heads and Colac. As ‘ground’ for the narrative’s focus on business schemes, work, relationships, attitudes, dreams and dissatisfactions, they stress the self-conscious history-making of this 1919–23 “love story” (12). It is appropriate that the solidity of Melbourne’s cityscape is contrasted with the Maribyrnong River valley, the city centre’s street names, rectangular grid and particular buildings with west suburban mudflats as the site for Badgery’s bower-bird construction of a family love-nest composed from a church hall stolen from Brighton Methodists, spare wing-sections from the Morris Farman aeroplane, carpet foraged from Port Melbourne tip, and a water tank ‘borrowed’ from an Essendon building-site. Typically, in its inventiveness, the eccentric/ex-centric draws attention not just to its antithesis in the idea of the historically verifiable ‘real’ but also to mediations of that real wrought by memory, selection, perspective and language.

The text even includes its ‘education of an architect’, in Herbert Badgery’s instruction of Hissao, the one whose name evokes all snakes and dragon influences in its peculiar reptilian collection and, as well, prefigures the Japanese connection in this generation’s entrepreneurial activity:

An architect must have the ability to convince people that his schemes are worth it. The better he is the more he needs charm, enthusiasm, variable walks, accents, all the salesman’s tools of trade.
I showed him, most important of all, the sort of city it was – full of trickery and deception. If you push against it too hard you will find yourself leaning against empty air [...] and I had him do drawings, of buildings that lied about their height, their age, and most particularly their location. There was not one that did not pretend itself huddled in some European capital with weak sun in summer and ice in winter. (546–47)

So the supreme architect of illusion, instructed in Sydney as the city of illusions – this hybrid of European borrowings – fulfils three generations of Badgery promise in “opening out the pet shop, living out the destiny I had mapped for him when I took him to the South Pylon of the Bridge [... he was building a masterpiece” (597). Its display in cages of lifesavers, inventors, manufacturers, bushmen, Aboriginals, artists and writers as the genuine Australian re-positions the text’s long journey through markers of Australian culture. Questioning ideas of the typical, like Bail’s redeployment of the images, its play with caricature satirizes identikit national formations to encourage attention to particularity and difference. When Carey returns to a Sydney context in The Tax Inspector, with its concentration on the bizarre Catchprice family of the western suburbs, the microcosmic family presents a much darker vision of the city. Amidst the talk of deals, debts, dirty money and public corruption, and linked emblematically with them, are the secrets of incest within the family, Benny Catchprice’s sexual fantasies, and the Gothic cellar beneath Catchprice Motors. Here, in this threatening underworld of the city and the damaged psyche, Maria Takis, the tax inspector, faces her obsessive young captor:

It was like a subway tunnel in here. She could smell her own death in the stink of the water. Even while she had fought to stop his grandmother being committed, all this – the innards of Catchprice Motors – had been here, underneath her feet.19

This lower bodily view of the city is a much darker carnivalesque than the ebullient parody in Illywhacker, but, like the earlier work, it questions comfortable assertions of reality.

The work of fiction reminds us that the actual world is more inconclusive, more open to refigurings, discoveries and new combinations than it is sometimes held to be. Complex and heterogeneous, it invites and resists attempts at settlement. As Doreen Maitre suggests in Literature and Possible Worlds, “By the presentation of worlds which in some ways invite us to take them for the actual world, the novel makes us aware of both the continuities and the

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discontinuities between the actual and the possible." I have argued that Carey’s emphasis on building acknowledges this play between continuities and discontinuities. The play elements are in the text and in the culture that it both addresses and re-dresses. To extend this argument, I wish to turn attention to the other side of the figure of building as bricolage to examine, more specifically, the text’s focus on language and writing.

The Theft of History

Late in Illywhacker, and after she has read his notebooks (now that he has taught himself to be an author as “the only scheme available”), Leah Goldstein complains that Herbert Badgery treats history badly:

> A hundred things come to me, things that amused me at the time, touched me – and now I see they were only excuses to thieve things from me. And even then you have not done me the honour of thieving things whole but have taken a bit here, a bit there, snipped, altered, and so on. You have stolen like a barbarian, slashing a bunch of grapes from the middle of a canvas. (549)

Badgery has, Goldstein alleges, not only misappropriated her ideas, but has so misrepresented the truth that events and people, the detail and the tone, are gross distortions of actuality. Badgery is the liar, discovering in writing the ideal outlet for his talent. She is the one with the liar’s lump, “the callus where her HB pencil fitted against her finger” (552). In this altercation between ‘writers’, Carey stages a battle that the text has enjoined from the start, its postmodernist polemic against naive constructions of truth-telling.

The variable concept of ‘play’ is important in contemporary historiography, whereby, in consideration of the problematics of position and selection, together with the slippages in language itself, history is seen as an always divided construct and not a seamless record of the actual. If we can agree with Rodolphe Gasché that there is no need for poststructuralism to rediscover history “because history was never lost,” it is necessary, nevertheless, to address the relationships between history, culture, and writing. As the debates demonstrate, these issues are not solved in any simple sense; rather, there are persuasions, variations, provisional agreements, and degrees of consensus, and the discourse outruns answers, as it should. For the purposes of this context, I would like to take the instance of Frank Lentricchia’s discussion of

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Derrida’s work to create one perspective for the analysis of writing’s relationship with ‘history’ in Carey’s novel. Although Leah Goldstein may seem to present merely a common, and simple, complaint about selection and perspective in alleging that Badgery’s theft transgresses her text, the Chinese-box structure situates her letter of complaint within his Illywhacker performance. The figure demonstrates again the artifice of the real and the unavoidable infidelity of words to history and to culture if they are perceived as givens rather than as constructs. Similarly, the “social realist” style that Graeme Turner sees in the first part of Illywhacker, the style that traditionally privileges history, is not only preceded and framed by Herbert Badgery’s opening declaration of his addiction to lying but is variously qualified, as it proceeds, by the excesses of a storyteller whose reliability everywhere contends with his enthusiasm for exaggeration. In Illywhacker the fantastic does not gradually replace a social-realist mode; it is introduced from the start.

While regarding Derrida’s deconstructive work as thoroughly formalist, Lentricchia emphasizes as well his historical consciousness. He allows (at least) two different emphases in interpretation of this work, that which encourages “the pleasure-oriented formalism of the Yale critics” (the common Marxist formulation of Anglo-American deconstruction), and his view that Derrida initiates a new historical project, one that Lentricchia finds already underway in Foucault’s writing. He does not, therefore, condemn Derridean deconstruction to any ahistorical, apolitical, acultural wasteland of self-delighting free play; rather, emphasizing Derrida’s interrogation of the play of signification from within writing, and on temporal and cultural ‘grounds’, he acknowledges his attention to authorities and to contexts, and quotes, approvingly:

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22 See Graeme Turner, “American Dreaming: The Fictions of Peter Carey,” *Australian Literary Studies* 12.4 (1986): 434. Turner’s case for placing Carey’s fiction in an American context on the basis of stylistics is supported not only by reference to the American metafictionists but also by Carey’s own references to American culture and influence. Central in “American Dreams,” *Bliss* and *Illywhacker*, it receives a vigorous postcolonial emphasis in the displaced terms of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*.

23 This analysis draws on Lentricchia’s discussion in *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980). Similar concerns about cultural context inform his later study *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), in which he prefers Kenneth Burke’s emphasis on the operations of power in discourse, and his platform for social change, to the political conservatism he reads in de Man’s work: “Deconstruction is conservatism by default – in Paul de Man it teaches the many ways to say that there is nothing to be done. The mood is all from early T.S. Eliot. We are Prufrocks all, all hollow men, who inhabit the wasteland that we know now is the humanities wing of the modern university: ‘Paralyzed force, gesture without motion’” (51). He exempts Derridean deconstruction.
I didn’t say there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being – a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it.24

Derrida’s work does not deny ‘authorities’ or ‘centres’ – rather, it characteristically refuses their power to specify the limits of meaning. This is not, then, a denial of history, but a reminder that it involves heterogeneity, fragmentation, and difference, and that constructions or readings of history must take account of its writing. In Lentricchia’s words,

Put as boldly as possible, Derrida’s point is that once we have turned away from various ontological centerings of writing, we do not turn to free-play in the blue, as the Yale formalists have done. Rather, it would appear that our historical labours have just begun. (175)

To labour with the play of difference is to attend to circumstance, context, ideology and rhetoric, and to be aware of the seriousness of play in language and of choices in its use.

In Illywhacker, then, the theft of history is that act of appropriation which uses the past selectively, in play, to construct new configurations that are always already ‘old’ as part of a discourse that precedes and succeeds them. Herbert Badgery’s alleged appropriations of Leah Goldstein’s alleged history resemble Carey’s continuing raids upon an Australian cultural inheritance which is itself a very divided narrative, with creative acts of theft as various as the bizarre allegory of The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith, the construction of Jack Maggs from Dickens’s invitation in Great Expectations and, so much to the point, the provocations of True History of the Kelly Gang. In the process, there are points of contact and difference; that which is ordered in its representation of history can be shown to be only seeming whole and unified, an exercise in writerly bricolage that by bearing/baring the stamp of its rhetoric invites not demolition, but more thinking/writing.

The text’s address to writing, its self-referencing, provides notice of language as a medium for duplicity. And, as Helen Daniel observes, the formal arrangements draw attention sharply to the text’s constructedness and artifice:

With his “salesman’s sense of history,” Herbert’s telling of it is in the true Illywhacker style, playing on all its high points, teasing out its tangles where

major strands knot together, interrupting the narrative to go back to some earlier episode or run ahead to anticipate some later development, telling yarns within yarns, running off at tangents and detours when they promise richer tales.²⁵

With its repetitive emphasis on ‘lying’, *Illywhacker* suits Daniel’s template. Badgery’s opening declaration presents Epimenides’ paradox, “All Cretans are liars,” and the text appears to offer “splendid new fictions at every turn, lies which are beautiful and noble, some subsistence lies, some mean and ignoble, snivelling things, noisome, some simply bullshit.”²⁶ But the terminology deals unavoidably with ‘truth’ and, with that measure as the provenance of lies, there is always the challenge of attending closely enough to the irresistible duplicity of language as it complicates the simple opposition of ‘truth’ and ‘lie’. As some commentators have argued, notwithstanding the importance of Daniel’s study there is a totalizing rhetoric at work within her discoveries of the liars’ arts:

Daniel’s fallacious assumption of a correspondence between nature (its conceptual paradigm) and fiction runs throughout *Liars*. Peter Carey is said to display, in all his stories, a “translucency, through which we glimpse the infinite onion of the universe, with all its layers of reality” (159). What the reader discovers, it should be answered, is more fiction: complex, multi-layered, playful fiction.²⁷

In its self-conscious attention to language and to acts of writing, this “playful fiction” represents the ‘historical novel’ in its dividedness, and with recognition of the reader’s complicity in the art of building new constructions, in language, upon the uncertain foundations of a cultural inheritance.

This recognition is everywhere apparent in *Illywhacker*. It is signalled not just in the overt ‘Dear Reader’ gestures that present this book’s revisions of the ancient and playful ‘contract’, revisions that also deconstruct any sense of homogeneity in reception by their emphasis on dissembling:

But for the rest of it, you may as well know, lying is my main subject, my specialty, my skill. (11)

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In a moment I must tell you how, competing with my son for the affection of a woman, I misused the valuable art I had learned from Goon Tse Ying. (209)

no use at all in you skipping pages, racing ahead, hoping for a bit of hanky-panky. (227)

My greatest wish is to show you my brave and optimistic boy struggling against the handicap of his conception and upbringing towards success. (436)

Lucky man, you say, to be so old and frail and yet, at the same time, to inspire such devotion. Bullshit, professor. (490)

You, my dear sticky-beak, already know the conditions of life on the fourth gallery, but for me it was a revelation. (521)

And so on. As is usually the case, such ‘direct’ addresses paradoxically deconstruct unities, of ‘reader’ and of narrator, by using the conventions of décorum in communication to displace, as pretence, the ‘contract’ of communication. They do not advertise reliability and truth; rather, the guise of confessional intimacy displays its artifice and invites readers to the novel exchange as a process of decidedly playful collusion. They are an obvious narrative strategy and, like structural arrangements that disrupt simple linear construction and its associations, they question not so much the idea as the grounds of representation. But, beyond this, they also point to the more fundamental recognition that the play against closure is in the language.

In the fissures of words, in the inexactitude of matches and in the conjurings, there are opportunities for continuing play. Those approximations of reference that allow Herbert Badgery’s flighty self-constructions hold for the simultaneous demolition and renovation of language: “There is nothing like a bit of opening out to get people to declare their position. You’ll find that this does not happen until the bricks are actually falling” (532). And with ontological confinements suspended, the opportunities for play are considerable: “There is no God. There is only me, Herbert Badgery, enthroned high above Pitt Street while angels or parrots trill attendance” (572). Writing displaces speech as the Illywhacker becomes novelist and, in the pastiche of ‘Australian’ markers, culture is refigured as a linguistic construction. Badgery’s spiel draws attention not to Carey but to language. It dismisses neither history nor culture; rather, the ‘voice’ emphasizes the (dis)continuous work of shaping forces and the desirability of open-endedness in addresses that bring the ‘past’ forward to the present. There is an exuberance in language in Carey’s inventive play with ideas and in the range of allusions to twentieth-century Australian culture. The stories about Melbourne and the Victoria Market, selling cannons and model-T Fords, snakes and dragons, Molly Rourke and the electric invigorator, the Kaletskys in Sydney, travels across Victoria, Charles’s trade in animals and birds, and the peculiar history of the Pet Shop, create a
vivid impression of the mobile text in its sweep of cultural reference. And the mobility is reflexive:

town to town, dancing, writing letters. I cannot stay still anywhere. It is not a country where you can rest. It is a black man’s country: sharp stones, rocks, sticks, bull ants, flies. We can only move around it like tourists. (323)

In their movements ‘abroad,’ Bail’s tourists gather bizarre markers of ‘Australia’ in parody of national identity. In Carey’s use of the figure, the mobility again resists the idea of unity. As his characters criss-cross the cultural landscape of three generations of selective Australian history, the mobility of the signifiers emphasizes difference. *Illywhacker* is the work of one who has learned that “a poem can take any form, can be a sleight of hand, a magician’s trick, be built from string and paper, fish or animals, bricks and wire” (201).

**Double-Dealing Fiction**

One of the most remarkable images in Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* is the figure of Lucinda prowling the ’tween decks of *Leviathan* looking for a game. Presenting the young heiress as a compulsive gambler, and the Reverend Oscar Hopkins as an obsessive, Carey concentrates again on ideas of play, chance and gamesome opportunity – the gambler’s addiction – in rewriting ‘Australian’ historical fiction. Having taken to cards “like a duck to water” (166) and gambled with the odds in England, and being driven to desperation on the home passage by a freak of the *Leviathan*’s ventilation system, Lucinda is the female hero with a double passion. Associated with the gambling streak, she knows the contradictory fascination of glass:

> she did not have to be told, on the day she saw the works at Darling Harbour, that glass is a thing in disguise, an actor, is not solid at all, but a liquid, that an old sheet of glass will not only take on a royal and purplish tinge but will reveal its true liquid nature by having grown fatter at the bottom and thinner at the top, and that even while it is as frail as the ice on a Parramatta puddle, it is stronger under compression than Sydney sandstone, that it is invisible, solid, in short, a joyous and paradoxical thing, as good a material as any to build a life from. (135)

It is, in other words, another work of fiction. Duplicitous, a double-dealing thing of fascinating appearances whose reality is both illusory *and* tenacious, it is variously interpretable – another “mould of fashion, glass of form.” Orchestrating his gamblers’ educations, Oscar’s in England and Lucinda’s in Australia, towards the climactic mid-ocean meeting of their double confession, and the eventual *imago* of the glass church, Carey juggles with large narrative
interpretations of European, and Christian, experience of the southern continent. Granting Oscar a gambler’s perception of meaning – “‘Our whole faith is a wager, Miss Leplastrier [...] we bet that there is a God. We bet our life on it. We calculate the odds, the return’” (261) – opens again the closed text of History. Like Herbert Badgery’s lies, it refigures the cultural inheritance as the multi-faceted construction of networks of narrative, the ‘product’ as a field of play. In *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, Carey’s concerns with particularities of Australian history are subsumed under a phantasmagoria of the world history of imperialism and empire presented symbolically in the relationship between colonial Efrica and colonizing Voorstand and with attention to questions of power, influence, ideas about history, individual displacement and negotiations of meaning, significance and identity. Introducing quest themes, Tristan Smith/Bruder Mouse as grotesquely misshapen hero, political intrigue, Sirkus performance, riddles, deception and the solace of love, the picaresque narrative is a Tristan’s story. Unreal in its excesses, exploring contemporary postcolonial concerns in the displaced forms of its mix of fable, symbol, myth and satire, this fiction shows Carey tempering history with bizarre imaginings. Addressing the national and international, historical and visionary, this fiction, like *Illywhacker*, also focuses on the instabilities, uncertainties, needs and small triumphs of individuals. Despite the elaborate frameworking and theatricality, its play with concepts and with language, it comes back to the intimacies of those *petits récits* that, in Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern, replace the grand narratives of human knowledge and progress.

In this analysis, I have suggested that Carey’s work, his inventive bricolage, refigures the Australian experience as an open site for further constructions. Whereas, in Bail’s texts, it is polished cartoonist exaggerations that question the stereotypes of a ‘national’ culture, Carey’s displacements are the results of careful detail turned, finally, to extremities. Presented with a self-conscious edge of exaggeration, as entertainment and as commentary, his cultural landscapes are remarkable for their coupling of difference and familiarity, and, in Herbert Badgery’s building and lying, as in Oscar’s and Lucinda’s gambling, Tristan Smith’s role as Bruder Mouse, and Ned Kelly’s grand claims to truth-telling, he creates figures that are emblematic as well as particular. In the processes of their artful play with ‘national’ constructions, Carey’s texts disassemble the past as a reliable concept; they offer the attractions of new building permits unconstrained by regulations that limit the play of signification to measuring a construction’s strength according to the quality of its truth-claim.

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HOW IS SACREDNESS IMAGINED in postmodern and post-colonial cultures such as contemporary Australia? It was commonplace for cultural critics in the later twentieth century to situate the formation of ‘Australia’ at the limit of Western concerns about the sacred or, more specifically, religion. Russel Ward’s iconic legendary Australian bloke from the mid-twentieth century is “a hard case, sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally”;¹ the poet James McAuley’s Australians are “hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them”;² the critic Jennifer Rutherford, in her account of the reception of Patrick White’s Riders in the Chariot, declares:

> Not only is the religious thematic deemed un-Australian […]. Almost unanimously, the critical community has understood White to be exalting and idealising the four ‘mystics’ in opposition to a profane, malignant and aesthetically stupid suburban Australia […]. This attests to implicit conceptions of Australia as a site devoid of any encounter with those modalities of being that we can variously name mystical, sacred, religious or ecstatic.³

And David Tacey, in his influential 1995 volume Edge of the Sacred, summarizes a common (stereo)type of the Australian identity, arguing that

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The loss of spiritual ecstasy in both white and black cultures has been replaced by the spurious, artificial ecstasy that is provided by alcohol and drugs. We can all get drunk together, and then have a bloody good fight at the end of it: this is one of the few forms of shared social ritual we still have left today.  

Reinforcing such stubborn national stereotypes, the dominant postmodern and postcolonial critical debates about such twentieth-century writers as McAuley, Buckley, Murray, Wright, Oodgeroo, Neilson, Webb, White, Malouf, Murray, Mudrooroo, Carey, Garner, Winton, and many more have most often been embarrassed by, or dismissive of, a category such as ‘the sacred’. This is despite the fact that many Australian writers have approached issues of sacredness in multiple ways: as problem, celebration, trauma, tragedy, farce, fullness or emptiness; as Romantic, indigenous, postmodern. I have been using the crushingly monolithic and inadequate term ‘the sacred’ so far, but one ambition of this essay is to open up a number of possibilities about how contemporary Australian writing approaches issues of ‘sacredness’.

And how could Australian writers escape the urgent need to examine Australia’s cultural life, past, present and still forming, in this context of the sacred? While the commonplace myths of Australia as modern secular state persist, the last decades of the twentieth century have begun to open out a dialogue in which such terms as sacredness, spirit, belief, and religion are seen not merely as embarrassing or irrelevantly archaic, but as urgent elements in new national and global debates. In Australia, as in other postcolonial cultures, the confrontations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples have had, and continue to have, powerful effects; globally, the need to examine the hydra-headed ‘sacred’ has its impetus in the broader debates of postcoloniality, diaspora, religious fundamentalism, and the effects of capitalism.

I wish to focus here on Peter Carey’s novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), in which a complex set of relevant binaries is negotiated: England and Australia; Christendom and indigenous knowledges; divine providence and chance; adult and child; sensuality and sacredness. Many of these binaries circle around the fragile and conflicted figure of Oscar, the believer who makes his way – bumpily, accidentally, trembling – to Australia, and to a believing that looks equally like unbelief.

Carey’s celebrated novel provokes a range of questions about how the sacred might be probed, imagined and articulated in a postmodern and postcolonial culture. For bible-carrying, pale-skinned, diffident Oscar, sacredness is bound up with the terror of his unlikely, colonizing mission, but it is he, un-

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knowingly, who is approaching his own transformation, even as he would transform the ‘savage’ land around him. Ensconced and petrified in his glass church towards the end of the novel, Oscar

...drifted up the Bellinger River like a blind man up the central aisle of Notre Dame. He saw nothing. The country was thick with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slippery leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence. Some of these stories were as small as the transparent anthropods that lived in the puddles beneath the river casuarinas. These stories were like fleas, thrip, so tiny that they might inhabit a place (inside the ears of the seeds of grass) he would later walk across without even seeing. In this landscape every rock had a name, and most names had spirits, ghosts, meanings.5

For Carey, here, sacredness is bound up with stories. Or, more precisely, with the processes of stories: listening for them, and to them; making and telling them; attending to their particularities, their tiny, earthed and fleshed realities. As a novelist, he is staking much on the multiple, ordinary, half-hidden, communal and redemptive processes of storytelling. As an Australian novelist, he is also obviously learning much from the land, from its storytelling, about the ancient, subtle, embodied, indigenous elements of stories. These are lessons which Oscar is slowly made to learn, too, just as he had, as a child, longed for his father to listen to his divergent spiritual and sensual intuitions.

...Beyond his bumbling, frightened will to implement the abstract tenets of his religious calling, Oscar is revealed more and more, to himself and to the reader, as the frightened little boy caught in the maelstrom of history. His hellish journey through the Australian landscape is that of a child – itchy, weak, bullied, terrified, obstinate – whose journey towards transformation had begun in his father’s austere religious house: as he “took the spoon and ate,” tasting the pudding which “did not taste like the fruit of Satan,” “treasuring it inside his mouth” (12). It is a sacred transformation that confronts him, a sacredness which begins to take multiple forms and discourses, on a journey which might be seen to imitate the terrifying expedition into emptiness of that earlier colonizing fictional hero, Voss.6 The child eating the pudding experiences simultaneously the hard blow of his father’s dogma, and the fruit which bursts pleasurably in his mouth. This central contradiction gives shape to Oscar’s journey towards the sacred.

This sacredness – or at least Oscar’s glimpses of it – is multiple and paradoxical: it is there in his terrified and passionate independence of spirit wrest-

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ling with the abstractions of his (equally sensual) father, that determined striver after “the pure and uncorrupted word of God” (19); it lurks in his vocation to undertake a religious, colonizing mission; and in his role as passionate angel of justice, bringing his “hate-bright axe down in the middle of Mr Jeffris’s glistening, brilliantined head” (480).

But the sacred looms most awfully for Oscar himself, stumbling on his expedition into the Australian bush. It is here that he confronts the possibility of the savage nothingness which might be his God.

In a pretty clearing beside some white-trunked paper-barks, Oscar saw a man tied to a tree and whipped until there was a shiny red mantle on his white shoulders and brown seeping through his Anthony Hordern’s twill trousers. His ‘mates’ all watched. Oscar prayed to Jesus but no prayer could block out the smell of the man’s shit. (464)

We are faced here with Carey’s simultaneously farcical and savage antipodean vision: of a colonial scapegoat in his “Anthony Horderns’ twill trousers,” and of Oscar’s impotent prayer. It is the sensual power of bodily suffering – the “shiny red mantle,” the “white shoulders,” the “smell,” the “brown seeping through” – that stands up to Oscar’s attempts at prayer. It’s a rabid, desperate prayer, not for the comfort or support of the victim, as might befit a passing pastor, but for himself, “to block out the smell of the man’s shit.” It is prayer, it might be argued, that is stripped of its redemptive aim for the Christ-like figure strung up on the “white-trunked paper-barks.” Perhaps a child’s self-centred prayer. In Carey’s approaches to the sacred in this novel, but no less in earlier novels such as Bliss, or Illywhacker, the struggle to comprehend or even glimpse sacredness is carried out in a specific place, and time, and body. The sacred does not operate as the antithesis of the material, or the body, but in dialogue with it. The farce lets in the body (the whipped and shitting man, Oscar’s revolted senses, the suggestions of crucifixion); but in no way are the sacred dimensions of the Australian colonial confrontations diminished by this. They are heightened. One might even say ‘australianized’.

Where might the sacred be found, how imagined, in such a place as colonial Australia? This sickened, stumbling and frightened Christian Oscar, still clinging to the staff of his religious mission and authority, is slowly being led towards a clearing, an emptiness in which his body and its senses and drives must be submitted to other stories, other bodies, other histories. But what kind of discourses does Carey use/invent to speak about sacredness in Oscar and Lucinda? Is there merely emptiness at the end of Oscar’s journey? The pathetic realization of his own huge, colonizing intrusiveness? What postmodern and postcolonial discourses are possible for imagining the contemporary sacred?
In a provocative 1992 essay, the Christian theologian Rowan Williams summarizes a range of late-twentieth-century propositions about the postmodern sacred, theological propositions influenced mostly by the work of Derrida:

God is an ‘effect of the trace’: to speak of God is to try to put a face upon that which haunts language – what is over the shoulder, round the corner, what is by stipulation not capable of being confronted, being faced.7

Williams sees writers such as John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart and Mark Taylor as, in their different ways, addressing Derrida in order to retrieve or radicalize his work for the via negativa, making différance “an occasion for ‘grace’”; for Derrida, and differently for scholars in his train, “the clarity with which the sacred, the order of grace or liberation, is assimilated to absence, rupture.”8 But Williams wants (as, I will argue, does Carey) to unsettle any satisfaction with this concept of absence. He writes, beyond Derrida:

What is thinkable is so precisely because thinking is not content with the abstraction of mutual exclusivities, but struggles to conceive a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories. Once again: time and understanding belong together; language constantly remakes itself in the fact of what is not yet understood, criticizes itself unceasingly […] we can indeed abstract to the trace of a perpetual shadow […] but this shadow can only ‘appear’ in the historical process of making (communicable, communal) sense, in the ‘following’ of discourse.9

Williams has many agendas running here, not the least being a desire to resist “the relegation to profanity of the temporal, the communicative, the implied devaluation of exchange.”10 Williams’s is a theology which acknowledges the larger Derridean claims to God and the sacred as that which is never finally or sufficiently knowable. It acknowledges the contribution of the human critical ability to abstract, to comprehend its own inadequacies and the inadequacies of language, in the face of the incomprehensible. But Williams’s theology is also one that seeks to understand the place not only of the abstract, but also of the times, places, words and histories that are experienced – spoken, written, narrated, communally entered into; exchanged.

Williams’s concept of the sacred is valuable when we come to consider the effects of the final scene in Oscar and Lucinda. For Oscar, sitting in his ridi-

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8 Williams, “Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” 73.
9 “Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” 76.
culous, sublime, monstrous and beautiful glass church, what seems to remain are words which turn agonizingly in a void. His church is no longer holy. His body is sunburnt, throbbing, infected, itching. Regressing, in his despair, to his Sydney days, Oscar mortifies his flesh, “digging his nails into the backs of his hands” (519), making near-autistic rocking movements to comfort himself as he begs God for absolution. It is a moment of collision in which Oscar’s language, sacred and profane at once, is slammed hard up against the failure of language to communicate. For Oscar, it is not Williams’s moment of language constantly remaking itself, but the seeming end of language, language as the production of false signs, of human blindness and farce:

It was not quite dark. Flying foxes filled the sky above the river. The tilting platform became a ramp and the glass church slid beneath the water and while my great-grandfather kicked and pulled at the jammed door, the fractured panes of glass behind his back opened to let in his ancient enemy.

A great bubble of air broke the surface of the Bellinger and the flying foxes came down close upon the river. When they were close enough for his bad eyes to see, he thought they were like angels with bat wings. He saw it as a sign from God. He shook his head, panicking in the face of eternity. He held the doorknob as it came to be the ceiling of his world. The water rose. Through the bursting gloom he saw a vision of his father’s wise and smiling face, peering in at him. He could see, dimly, the outside world, the chair and benches of his father’s study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. And when the long-awaited white fingers of water tapped and lapped on Oscar’s lips, he welcomed them in as he always had, with a scream, like a small boy caught in the sheet-folds of a nightmare. (510–11)

What can we make of this fictionalized personal history overlaid on a piece of colonial myth-making? Is the narrative’s outcome to be read as comic, tragic, farcical? Is Oscar’s fate, as so many Australian critics see it, a fitting end for the bungling colonial missionary in the Australian wilderness? Or is there space for the narrative’s tangled mix of lyrical and psychological threads to move the reader to sympathy for a myopic and bumblingly naive character caught in the jaws of history and its larger movements? All language stops for Oscar as the water laps at his lips, and he turns, with his primal scream of fear, back to beginnings, or to the void.

This narrative moment represents a deadly embracing of Oscar by his father, by his God, by his deepest fears and doubts – possibly by nothingness. But it also represents an end to nightmare. His father’s face is imagined as wise and smiling; Oscar, trapped in a tiny snow-cone of glass and water, is taken away from all his bodily pain, attended by bat-winged angels. Are these signs of promise or of terror? Of the great void awaiting Oscar? Or are we, in the density and interpretability of Carey’s prose, offered language-making
which is, in Williams’s terms “not content with the abstraction of mutual exclusivities, but [which] struggles to conceive a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories”?

This passage, and Oscar and Lucinda as a whole, cannot of course be contained within a category called ‘the sacred’. As Williams argues, the sacred emerges in the process of negotiation, “the historical process of making (communicable, communal) sense.” This notion of how and where the sacred might emerge comes close to Carey’s playful, relentless understanding of the processes of storytelling: exchange, negotiation, community; passing on from one to the other, getting it wrong, seeking an ear; terrifying, enthralling, seductive, convincing, partial.

So how is the reader placed by this final scene, this piece of the story within other stories: Oscar’s, the narrator’s, the multiple, half-heard stories of the land? It is possible to read the glass church as womb-like, a place where the polarities of this character, and of the novel as a whole, are brought achingly together, momentarily: Oscar, the English Christian gentleman missionary confronted ultimately with the exigencies of chance and arbitrariness; and by the possibility of utter emptiness. We might call this transparent figment, the glass church, ‘choric’, a “dancing receptacle,” after Kristeva; a divine space on the “borderline between all polarities: being and nothing, idealism and materialism, sacred and profane, silence and language.” Associated with “the chaos of infantile experience,” Kristeva’s chora is metaphorical birthplace and grave of the non-subject, the one who must acknowledge lack of mastery, dissolution of subjectivity, of self and Other, emptiness, a place of ultimate humility, an emptying of the self in both hope and doubt. Oscar has created this tiny colonial cathedral, into which he has sought, bumblingly and stubbornly, to drag and house his sacred; but as his little shrine splits apart to allow in the dimly perceived Other world – Australian flying foxes and sky and river and land – this awkward misreader of signs, this Odd Bod, is returned by Carey to where he has always been most at home: the place before language, before religion, the place of terrible rebirth where the sacred might possibly be revealed. What remains are the community of readers and Carey’s words struggling with wholeness to make a story, many stories. And exchange.

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11 Williams, “Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” 76.
12 “Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” 76.
13 Philippa Berry, “Woman and Space according to Kristeva and Irigaray,” in Shadow of Spirit, 256.
14 Berry, “Woman and Space,” 258.
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“The Empire had not been built by choirboys”

The Revisionist Representation of Australian Colonial History in Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*¹

**Ansgar Nüning**

“The land is stolen. The whole country is stolen. The whole nation is based on a lie which is that it was not already occupied when the British came here. If it is anybody’s place it is the blacks.’ Does it *look* like your place? Does it *feel* like your place? Can’t you see, even the trees have nothing to do with you.”²

Introducing *Oscar and Lucinda*

Crossing boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, historiography and historical fiction, and individual stories and collective history has become one of the hallmarks of postmodernist historical novels. The themes and forms of such works express revisionist notions of history, focusing on the perception of history in the minds of average people rather than on key historical events as well as undermining the

¹ This is a revised translation of an article that was published in *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 27.3 (1994): 171–87. More recent significant scholarship has been reviewed in the course of revision. I should like to extend my warmest thanks to my assistants Rose Lawson and Dorothee Birke for their invaluable help.

basic assumptions of positivist historiography. Since the end of the 1960s there has been such an upsurge of innovation in revisionist, metafictional, and self-reflexive historical fiction in England that the paradigm shift undergone by this genre can hardly be overlooked. The fact that since 1969 no fewer than ten such postmodernist historical novels have been awarded the prestigious Booker Prize testifies to the reawakened interest in such fiction. One of the most distinguished of these Booker novels is Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). It presents a revisionist view of Australian colonial history, incorporating those thematic domains – the history of mentalities, women’s history, oral history, history ‘from below’ and the history of everyday life – that recent historiography has focused on.

In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey involves a wide variety of characters, milieux and situations, thus creating a multi-faceted panorama of mid-nineteenth-century colonial history without suppressing its conflict-laden ambivalences. On account of the length and complexity of the novel, a brief analysis of the various strands of the plot and their combination will be provided here. The plot, which unfolds in the 1850s and continues until 1866, focuses on the life stories of the two eponymous characters Oscar Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier. They are introduced as two eccentric outsiders who grew up in diametrically opposite cultural circumstances. Their paths only cross in the middle of the novel, which is narrated in epic dimensions.

Varying the motif of the Antipodes so common in Australian literature, Carey contrasts the strand of the story set in England with life on the fifth continent. In the first eighteen chapters, he paints a detailed picture of the religious tendencies and ideological attitudes gaining currency in Victorian England in the wake of Darwin’s teachings. Drawing on elements of Sir Edmund Gosse’s autobiography *Father and Son* (1907), he starts his novel by describing Oscar’s growing detachment from his widowed father, Theophilus, who, as member of the Plymouth Brethren, a strict protestant sect, raises his son ascetically and attempts to harmonize his fundamentalist biblical faith with scientific discoveries. After the fifteen-year-old Oscar rejects his father’s bigotry and runs away from home, he is taken in by the Anglican vicar Hugh Stratton and his wife. Oscar is considered a quirky loner during his time as a student of theology at Oxford. When he is introduced to the world of horse-racing by his extravagant fellow-student Ian Wardley–Fish (who later on follows him to Australia), and Oscar wins straight-off, he interprets this as a sign of God and falls victim to gambling, using it to pay for his studies and

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support his foster-father. For the rest of his life, he wav[ers between gambling and fearing God, and between fatalistic risk-taking and ascetic self-discipline.

By alternating the chapters about Oscar’s life in England with the sequences that are set in Australia (ch. 20–26, 31–34, 36–40), Carey repeatedly contrasts the conservative, compulsive and decadent morality and manners of Victorian England with the (seemingly) progressive and free life in New South Wales. In contrast to Oscar, the independent-thinking, intelligent and confident Lucinda grows up on a remote farm near Parramatta, which she is forced to relinquish after the death of her parents. Her striving after an independent life had always been encouraged by her ambitious mother, and Lucinda continues to go her own way, in disregard of the narrow-minded conventions of colonial society. The money she inherits from her parents guarantees her financial independence and, once she comes of age, allows her to buy a glass factory in Sydney, thus fulfilling a childhood dream. Once there, the fact that she joins the evening card-playing sessions at jovial Mr d’Abbs’s house, maintains a harmless relationship with the pastor Dennis Hasset (which earns her a reproof from the bishop), and owns a factory provides good reason for the philistine, materialistic and utterly misogynous colonial society to disapprove of her.

After a journey to London, Lucinda meets Oscar for the first time on the return voyage to Australia (ch. 46–61) in 1865. Oscar had tossed a coin to help him decide whether to emigrate as a missionary or not. While they are discovering and indulging their joint love of gambling, the couple’s friendship assumes scandalous proportions for the passengers and crew, who form a microcosm of Australian colonial society. On her return, Lucinda discovers that the factory has been completely run down during her absence (ch. 62–64). Her unconventional ideas and life-style are viewed with even greater suspicion and rejection when the two outsiders bump into each other again in Sydney. Oscar has meanwhile lost his position as clergyman on account of his gambling (ch. 65–70), and Lucinda plays the Good Samaritan by inviting him to stay at her house. Both of them are thereupon practically ostracized, despite the fact that their relationship remains purely platonic. Only after their separation does Lucinda become aware of the unrequited love that had developed between them. During the time they lived together, all advances – including a disastrous proposal of marriage by Oscar – were doomed to failure on account of Oscar’s solipsistic inhibitions, the suppression of his feelings and needs, and mutual misunderstanding (ch. 72–92).

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Both Lucinda and Oscar put their inheritances at stake for their last great wager: despite warnings from various quarters, an expedition arranged by Oscar – in which a glass church modelled on London’s Crystal Palace is transported through the Australian desert and many native people lose their lives – arrives at its destination after enduring many setbacks (ch. 93–106). Before the last leg of their inland voyage, Oscar, under the influence of laudanum, kills the megalomaniac expedition leader Mr Jeffris.

As the expedition has proved a success, Lucinda loses the bet and her entire fortune to Miriam Chadwick, who looks after and seduces the exhausted man upon his arrival, and to whom Oscar then feels obliged to propose. Shortly afterwards, however, the hydrophobic Oscar drowns in the Bellinger River, trapped inside the sinking glass church that had been transported on a barge on the last part of its journey (chap. 107–10).

Even before the two protagonists meet for the first time, the two main strands of the plot are linked by a number of thematic and motivic parallels as well as by the narrator. Carey also constructs a network of symbols and leitmotifs which adds further cohesiveness to the novel. The semanticizing of objects into symbolic bearers of meaning, whose significance is already implied by some of the chapter headings,\(^5\) culminates in the recurrence of the leitmotif of glass that brings Oscar and Lucinda together and finally destroys them.\(^6\) It also figures in the complex symbol of the glass church, which resists any attempts at fixing its meaning. The concise juxtaposition of developments in both settings by the narrator (“While Oscar Hopkins read Greats at Oriel, Lucinda Leplastrier nursed her mother,” 91–92) contributes to the gradual intertwining of the plots, as does the thematizing of questions of faith in New South Wales (see 97, 126). On the level of the plot, parallels are created and events duplicated through the emphasis put on the theme of loneliness (161, 201) and the passion for gambling in both characters (108, 177, 181) – their


\(^6\) See Huggan, “Is the (Günter) Grass Greener on the Other Side? Oskar and Lucinde in the New World,” _World Literature Written in English_ 30.1 (1990): 4: “But glass also cuts; so while it is the medium that brings Oscar and Lucinda together, it also brings about their mutual destruction. The paradoxical figure for this union/disruption is the fabulous glass church which [...] becomes both the symbol of their own fated love and a solitary reminder of the misguided idealism which attended the ‘founding’ and forming of the new crown colony of Australia.” For passages pertinent to the significance of glass in _Oscar and Lucinda_, see 130–35, 140–42, 469–70.
stories being compared by the narrator with “the case histories of pathological gamblers” (118).

In terms of narrative technique, the coherence is underlined by the internal focalization of the two protagonists, who observe each other in some scenes or think about each other (204–205, 231, 250, 300). In the scene where Oscar interprets throwing a coin as a signal “that God was sending him to New South Wales” (189), the coherence-producing motifs are condensed; the same can be said about Oscar’s sophistical attempt at self-justification, his belief that, in the last instance, even faith is founded on a kind of gambling (“‘We must stake *everything* on the unprovable fact of His existence,’” 261). Oscar’s and Lucinda’s addiction to gambling is also the starting-point for the two protagonists to come closer to each other during the voyage (ch. 57) as well as for their realistically motivated encounter in Sydney (ch. 64). Despite all their differences, Lucinda even sees a *doppelgänger* in Oscar: “she saw herself mirrored in him, the sudden coldness of the gambler’s passion” (262). Their similarities gain additional significance when one realizes that they define status of the two characters as societal outsiders, which again reflects the decentred representation of history.

Representing Everyday Australian History, *histoire des mentalités* and Women’s History

During the past few years, Australian authors have re-examined the turbulent history of their country, a development that was stimulated not least by the bicentenary celebrations of white settlement. New forms of revisionist historical fiction have accorded considerable importance to minorities and subjected groups which had hitherto been practically ignored in Australian literature and historical writing:

> Because the colonial culture has presented itself consistently in white, masculine and aggressively nationalistic terms in its literature, the new roles of women and of immigrants are very noticeable in the new writing.  

Carey, too, broadens the scope of the conventional historical novel in terms of content by including themes from the history of everyday life, *histoire des mentalités*, and women’s history. Although *Oscar and Lucinda* incorporates some of the stock themes and motifs of Australian literature (the problems of intercultural communication; white seizure of the continent; expeditions in—

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land as a way of proving oneself), Carey nevertheless breaks the restrictive mould of the realist novel by reducing the abstract phenomenon of ‘colonial control’ to a minimum, by individualizing historical processes, by choosing to portray exemplary episodes of colonial history through the eyes of an outsider, and by including the turbulent history of the brutal repression suffered by the Aborigines.

The title is itself an indication that Carey, by personalizing and individualizing past experience, cuts down Australian colonial history to human size. He is not primarily interested in great historical events; instead, he focuses on concrete events in the quotidian existence of two characters who both rate as eccentric outsiders. In his delineation of everyday life, Carey does not accentuate the historical events themselves, but, rather, devotes himself to the way his characters perceive these events and their effects. However, as the story of the titular characters’ dealings with each other is also metonymic for the relation between Australia and England, the novel cannot be said to convey a personalized picture of history. While the introverted, inhibited and earnst yet insensitive Oscar embodies important moral principles held by a Victorian vicar, the strong-willed, energetic and intrepid Lucinda represents features typical of the adventurous colonialist. The contrast between the characters thus undercuts gender stereotypes: the pronouncedly male ethos of mateship, the Australian ideal of brotherhood, begins to look questionable, especially as Lucinda, aspiring to this kind of comradeship, is excluded from it – on account of her sex (228).

The revisionist tendency of telling the unwritten (hi)story of those who have been forgotten from their own perspective manifests itself chiefly in the fact that Carey dedicates many chapters to relating the experience of a woman, thereby endorsing one of the key issues in women’s history: the significance of gender as an historical category. While in the sections set in England there is merely a passing mention by the narrator that Victorian women were excluded from privileges like attending university (45), the sections dealing with Lucinda make the discrimination of women a subject of central importance. Lucinda’s mother cherishes the hope that industrialization will enable women to attain independence and equal rights (86), but her daughter is soon confronted with the sobering realization that the young society of Australia is merely reproducing the discriminatory structures that characterized Victorian

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9 For an overview of women’s history and gender as a category of historical research, see, for example, Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia UP, 1988).
England. Although Lucinda quite early develops a critical awareness of the ways in which women are discriminated against in colonial society ("She did not like the way they treated their own women, or the assumptions they made about women in general," 88), she finds herself at the receiving end of these negative attitudes as she grows older.

It is typical of Carey’s metonymic presentation of complex social and cultural phenomena that he exemplifies these in little details; for instance, he pinpoints the restrictive morality prevalent at the time by describing the indignation aroused by an unconventional piece of clothing. When Lucinda wears bloomers (named after the nineteenth-century American reformer Amelia Bloomer), abhorred by every ‘respectable’ person with a sense of decency, she immediately makes herself a target of angry reproval: “Now Mrs Cousins knew nothing of Amelia Bloomer. She knew only what respectability required and this was not it” (99). The constant rejection that Lucinda suffers in her misogynous environment illustrates how limited the opportunities for self-development were for women in colonial society. Even as a factory owner in Sydney, Lucinda is treated with condescension (146), or stared at by men (203–204), simply because she has dared to trespass on a male preserve. She is shown respect only when she is with Oscar, who – being a man – is accepted by the – her own – workforce: upon Oscar’s first visit to the factory, the foreman immediately requests (albeit with colonial irony) that “the lord and master should inspect his new territory” (365). The development of Lucinda, who is brimming with confidence and knows no fear of social boundaries, is used to question the prevailing stereotypes:

She was going – of course she was – to inspect her cargo in the hold. This was her right. She was a manufacturer. She might not look like one to you, sir, but that only demonstrates your colonial nature. Not all manufacturers have side-whiskers and smoke cigars. (229)

Despite her gestures of rebellion against external limitations, she fails to overcome the systematic discrimination of women in colonial society, as it is based on patterns of thought, omnipresent in the contemporary collective consciousness, which she cannot escape:

But she was everywhere leashed in, in any case. It was the condition of her adult life to feel it. She refused the conventions of whalebone and elastic, but still she was squeezed and blistered, pinched and hobbled. (251)

The symbolic threat posed by collective male behaviour towards individual women is expressed in the apt metaphor of “the voodoo of a group of men” (203). Carey attributes the way in which the unconventional Lucinda is discriminated against to the norms and attitudes of an eminently misogynous
society that tolerates no deviation from the traditional image of the Victorian woman (228). In the final analysis, Lucinda is excluded not only because she violates restrictive norms but also because of her gender, “her otherness, her womanness” (299). Lucinda is also the only person who articulates a consciousness critical of the cultural stereotypes that are applied in the much fiercer exclusion of the Aborigines as ‘Other’: “The land was stolen from the blacks. She could not have it” (126).

The subjectivizing and personalizing of Carey’s revisionist representation of women’s history ties in with the upgrading of the history of everyday life that becomes central to the story in Oscar and Lucinda. It is in the vein of this historical discipline – whose aim it is to reconstruct historical experience, behaviour, thoughts and life-styles – that Carey treats “the actions and the suffering of those who are often tellingly and imprecisely labelled the ‘ordinary people’” and “brings the victims and the outlines of their suffering into focus.”\footnote{Alf Lüdtke, “Einleitung: Was ist und wer treibt Alltagsgeschichte?” Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1989): 9 (tr. Dorothee Birke).}
The broad range of subjects pertaining to everyday and social history includes the financial worries of an impoverished Anglican clergyman (23–24, 48–49) as well as life on an Australian farm (77–83) and the changing fortunes of Lucinda’s glass factory. The stress laid on ordinary people’s lives automatically entails rejection of a concept of history that is based primarily on great individuals.\footnote{An ironical rejection – reminiscent of Henry Fielding’s Jonathan Wild – of such a notion of history can be found in Illywhacker: “I would rather fill my history with great men and women, philosophers, scientists, intellectuals, artists, but I confess myself incapable of so vast a lie” (326).}

It is characteristic of the scepticism levelled at this centristic view of history that ‘great’ historical events are marginalized and fragmented, and that past experience of human beings takes their place. As in Geppert’s ‘other’ historical novel,\footnote{See Hans Vilmar Geppert, Der ‘andere’ historische Roman: Theorie und Strukturen einer diskontinuierlichen Gattung (Tübingen: Carl Niemeyer, 1976).} what is central to the traditional historical novel here remains on the periphery of the plot. The main concern is the perception of historical processes through the consciousness of the characters. Carey decodes the special nature of Australian colonial history by examining the mentalities and life-styles of two average persons whose quirks serve to accentuate sharply the peculiarities of the period.

Like other revisionist historical novels, Oscar and Lucinda is noticeably inspired by the desire to rewrite history, particularly from the point of view of those all too long ignored by traditional historiography. The fact that Carey
can be included among those authors who recount history in “the decentred manner we can associate with the history of mentalities”\textsuperscript{13} is evidenced by his narrator’s interest in the characters’ world-view and changes therein. Like the history of mentalities, Carey consistently draws attention to thematic aspects that are excluded from a form of history that deals mainly with great events; he is less interested in ‘facts’ than in processes of cultural signification, in perceptions of the self and of the surrounding world, as well as in the historical variability of attitudes and human experiences.\textsuperscript{14} While the first part of the novel, set in England, illustrates the loss of faith triggered by Charles Darwin and the resulting transformation of the Victorian world-picture, the second part, set in Australia, concentrates on the above-mentioned peculiarities of a misogynous colonial society. In both cases Carey is concerned with how experiences of past reality undergo cultural and regional change.\textsuperscript{15}

Carey’s discriminating presentation of the thought patterns and sensibility of the main characters as well as their mutual misunderstandings illustrates one of the tenets of historians of mentalities, “that past realities could only be perceived and experienced in a specific way by the people who were caught up in them.”\textsuperscript{16} This insight is reinforced by comments by the narrator, who repeatedly points out the historical variability of modes of thinking by directly addressing the reader:

You may have another word for all the things both Hopkinses (father and son) called God. It does not matter what you call it. For Theophilus it was


\textsuperscript{15} See the interview with Peter Carey in Candida Baker, \textit{Yacker: Australian Writers Talk about their Work} (Sydney: Picador, 1986): 70, in which Carey comments on the plot of \textit{Oscar and Lucinda}: “However, it’s something that couldn’t have happened at any other time.”

God. It was his fear, his conscience, whatever you want, but it was clear to him. (26)

The Structure of Narrative Mediation

The rewriting of history in Carey’s novels is not restricted to opening up new thematic fields; it is significantly accompanied by formal innovations. In formal terms, *Oscar and Lucinda* differs from the traditional historical novel by breaking with the restrictive conventions that had long prevailed in the Australian narrative tradition. Although Carey deploys typical features of the historical novel, such as narrating from hindsight and providing minute descriptions of setting and social milieu, he has also given important impulses to the genre by opening up new forms of representing history in fiction.

The temporal tension between the Victorian world of the characters and the present is thrown into greater relief by the fact that the narrator comments on the events from the perspective of the late twentieth century. He concerns himself with changes in ideology and world-view (28, 152, 212) and, at times, points to subsequent historical developments (81, 152, 506). On the one hand, the narrator’s and thus the readers’ privileged position of hindsight allows for reflections on the nature of history, temporarily displacing the representation of actual Australian colonial history. On the other hand, it invests the novel with a diachronic historical depth which repeatedly exposes how misguided many of the characters’ ideas are. Carey, however, refrains entirely from decrying the downside of colonialism by abusing his authorial privilege in a propagandistic manner. Instead, he exploits the potential afforded by the novel as a polyphonic linguistic construct – by allowing different voices to have their say and by thus ‘orchestrating’ the theme of ‘colonial history’.

Carey invests the first-person narrator, Oscar’s great-grandson (who reminds us of Tristram Shandy), with all the privileges of an authorial narrator. In numerous commentaries, the narrator supplements the characters’ limited perspectives, uncovers their self-deceptions and attempts at harmonization, and thus enables the reader to see the extent of their mutual misunderstand-

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17 Carey explains his choice of narrative situation in an interview: “I felt [third-person narration] was the only way to approach *Oscar and Lucinda*. [...] The bigger view of history and the church – I had to look at it from the present.” See Thomas E. Tausky, “‘Getting the Corner Right’: An Interview with Peter Carey,” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 4 (1990): 34.

nings. In spite of the narrator’s privileged position in dealing out information, the above-mentioned tendency to decentre ‘history’ is emphasized on the narratorial level by the fact that large sections of the novel are related from the limited viewpoint of either Oscar or Lucinda. The utter subjectivity of all experience of reality is underlined in narrative terms by the sensitive portrayal of characters as well as by frequent shifts in perspective. Moreover, Carey creates a broad spectrum of peripheral characters who also serve as reflectors, thereby illustrating the fact that historical events and experiences always depend on the point of view of the observer. This multiplicity of perspectives creates a multi-faceted yet also contradictory image of colonialism, and a colonial history dissolved in a variety of different viewpoints.

Thus, for example, the narrator promptly questions the version of the history of the glass church as it is implied in his mother’s nostalgic reminiscences. His remark “I learned long ago to distrust local history” (2) and his references to the contingency of explanations and contrasting interpretations of one and the same subject (134, 190) articulate his scepticism towards historiographical claims to authenticity. When he repeatedly points out how unreliable memory is (82, 102, 153), the belief in an objective reconstruction of the past is all the more undermined. In view of the conspicuous contradictions between conflicting versions, the narrator concludes:

But perhaps it is not one story anyway. The assertion that “our people had not seen white people before” suggests a date earlier than 1866 and a more complex parentage than I am able to trace. (467)

This insight is supported by Carey’s inclusion of the collective perspective of the Aborigines. He thus narratorially elucidates the idea that the explorers’ perception of events and the glorification of this period of Australian history in the country’s literature stand in stark contrast to the way the historical losers experienced this reality. It is characteristic of Carey’s interest in ethnic minorities in Australia19 that in Illywhacker he devotes a large amount of space to the representation of Jewish and Chinese life.20 While the author con-

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19 See Carey’s comment in an interview with Tom Tausky: “I do have those objective views that the minorities in Australia have not been represented enough, and it has continued to be portrayed as an Anglo–Celtic country long after it stopped being one”; Tausky, “‘Getting the Corner Right’,” 32.

cludes the (very entertaining) tall tales of Herbert Badgery with a satirical aside concerning the unquestioning faith in facts displayed by Western culture,\(^{21}\) in *Oscar and Lucinda* he highlights the significance that oral history has in Aboriginal culture. While the ‘blacks’ are initially described only as a homogeneous mass and as dangerous savages (from the perspective of the British colonials),\(^{22}\) Chapter 99, which is related from the Aborigines’ point of view, tells a completely different story and thus provides a striking contrast to these stereotypes. An old aborigine called Kumbaingiri Billy tells the handed-down “story of ‘How Jesus come to Bellingen long time-ago’” (467):

The white men came out of the clouds of Mount Darling. Our people had not seen white men before. We thought they were spirits. They came through the tea-trees, dragging their boxes and shouting. [...] We thought they were dead men. They climbed hills and chopped down trees. [...] They cut these trees so they could make a map. They were surveying with chains and theodolites, but we did not understand what they were doing. We saw the dead trees. (468)

By thus airing the historical losers’ view of the expedition, Carey reminds us that claiming the Australian continent entailed the systematic destruction of the freedom and peculiarity of an unfamiliar culture.\(^{23}\) For the Aborigines, this episode was by no means a heroic accomplishment, but the woeful tale of the destruction of their life, an experience they tried to preserve in a song – “At that time we made a song” (468):

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\begin{align*}
\text{Where are the bees which grew on these plains?} \\
\text{The spirits have removed them.} \\
\text{They are angry with us.}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^{21}\) See *Illywhacker*, 599: “She spends a lot of time explaining that she is not a Jew, that the sign is a lie, that the exhibition is based on lies; but visitors prefer to believe the printed information. This information, after all, is written and signed by independent experts.”

\(^{22}\) Extremely racist opinions are voiced by two minor characters: Mrs Burrows, whose husband was murdered by Aboriginals (160, 172), and the narrow-minded Mr Borrodaile (235). The narrator, however, points out how representative such stereotypes were at that time: “the views she was expressing were only different from much opinion in New South Wales in that they were unambiguously put” (172).

\(^{23}\) The English missionaries’ role in this destruction is analysed (with respect to historical documents as well as historiographic fiction, especially *Oscar and Lucinda*) by Dorothy Lane in “‘Deliver their land from Error’s chain’: Conversion, Convictism and Captivity in Australian Fiction,” in *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott & Paul Simpson–Housley (Cross/Cultures 48; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA : Rodopi, 2001): 92–108.
They leave us without firewood when they are angry.
They’ll never grow again.
We pine for the top of our woods, but the dark spirit won’t send them back.
The spirit is angry with us. (468)

By including the perspective of the Aborigines, Carey drives home the message that their alleged inferiority was not based on facts, but on fatal misconceptions and boundless arrogance. The colonizers’ attitude towards the indigenous population, which is motivated by a conviction of their own superiority, leaves us in no doubt that the British did not consider cultural differences as an expression of different but equally valid views of the world, but as differences that had to be eradicated, if necessary by the use of force. Their brutal behaviour testifies to their entrenched prejudice and crass ignorance of Aboriginal cultural tradition:

When the white men wanted to cross Mount Dawson, the Narcoo men did not wish them to. Mount Dawson was sacred. The young men were forbidden to go there. It was against their law. Then the leader of the white men shot one of the Narcoo men with his pistol. (469–70)

While the colonialists thus ignored what they saw as superstition and ignorance in the natives, this chapter shows that habits which – from a eurocentric point of view – may appear stupid and irrational make much sense within the frame of reference of a wholly different culture. From the point of view of the Aborigines, glass and the church that is transported through the desert are also seen in a different light. Although Kumbaingiri Billy admits that the Aborigines misunderstand many things, they do, in contrast to the supposedly civilized explorers, recognize that the white people attach great importance to the contents of the boxes containing parts of the glass church:

they got the idea these boxes were related to the stories [Oscar’s stories about Christ’s passion]. They thought they were sacred. They thought they were the white man’s dreaming. (469)

After the massacre of their brothers and the desecration of their sacred places, glass comes to be regarded as a symbol of destruction, and they record its devastating impact in another song:

Glass cuts.
We never saw it before.
Now it is here amongst us.
It is sacred to the strangers.
Glass cuts.
Glass cuts kangaroo.
Glass cuts bandicoot.
Glass cuts the trees and grasses.
Hurry on, strangers.
Hurry on to the Kumbaingiri.
Leave us, good spirits, go, go. (470)

This alternative version of history serves as a corrective to the assessment of the fanatical leader Jeffris, who recalls the title character of Patrick White’s novel *Voss* (1957) and the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt. While Jeffris is satisfied with the outcome of the absurd expedition (“He had put names to several largish creeks. He had set the heights of many mountains which had previously been wildly misdescribed,” 472) and the murder of Aborigines is mentioned only cursorily in his journal (“His journals recorded that he had ‘given better than we took’ from the ‘Spitting Tribe’. Also: ‘6 treacherous knaves’ from the Yarra-Happini had been ‘dispatched’ by their guns,” 472), his version is exposed as the inhumane fiction of a megalomaniac when contrasted with the Aborigines’ point of view. By showing that the received view of the history of Australia’s development under the white settlers is incompatible with the version of the historical losers, Carey unmasks those myths and fictions of Australian history24 that are alluded to in the epigraph of the present essay (a remark made by the Jewish snake-dancer Leah Goldstein) and which the narrator pointedly summarizes again later in *Illywhacker* by quoting a “luminous paragraph” from one M.V. Anderson:

“Our forefathers were all great liars. They lied about the lands they selected and the cattle they owned. They lied about their backgrounds and the parentage of their wives. However it is their first lie that is the most impressive for being so monumental, i.e., that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated and by that simple device they were able to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience. It is in the context of this great foundation stone that we must begin our study of Australian history.” (456)

The narrator in *Illywhacker* is no exception in this regard, as the very first chapter of the novel makes clear when he describes himself as a great liar: “I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar. I say that early to set things straight. *Caveat Emptor*” (11). He advises his readers straight away “to not waste your time with your red pen, to try to pull apart the strands of lies and

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24 See Paul Sharrad, “Responding to the Challenge: Peter Carey and the Reinvention of Australia,” *SPAN: Newsletter of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 25 (1987): 37: “*Illywhacker*’s other side, then, is parodic, undermining the myths it invokes, ironically showing how they persist but are transformed in contemporary Australia, how they obscure certain aspects of the past.”
truth, but to relax and enjoy the show” (11). Although his reports and reminiscences thus have no claim to authenticity, they illustrate well “The role of lies in popular perceptions of the Australian political fabric” (488). His stories, inextricably merging the facts, fictions and myths of Australian history, serve to illustrate the function of the storyteller as someone constituting reality. The narrative structure of *Illywhacker* implies that history is accessible only in the form of constructed stories.\(^{25}\) That these are in turn dependent on the culturally determined values and perceptions of each individual observer is openly admitted by Herbert Badgery:\(^ {26}\)

> I have a salesman’s sense of history. I do not mean about the course of it, or the import of it, but rather its scale of time, its pulse, its intervals, its peaks, troughs, crests, waves. [...] my days are short and busy and the intervals on my whirling clock are dictated by the time it takes to make a deal, and that is the basic unit of my time. (343)

In *Oscar and Lucinda*, too, Carey sensitizes the reader to the perspectivity and subjectivity of every representation of history by including a broad range of perspectives in his narrative mediation. Further, the significance of chronology and causality as categories of order is called into question by the temporal and spatial leaps between the 110 brief chapters. The episodic structure of the plot as well as the discontinuous, achronological and fragmentary mode of narration dissolve colonial history into a number of at times contradictory stories. The techniques of narrative mediation Carey deploys serve to challenge and deconstruct teleological and eurocentric notions concerning the rise of British colonialism in Australia, and alert the reader to the diversity and plurality of historical experience and ways of thinking.

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\(^{25}\)See Teresa Dovey, “An Infinite Onion: Narrative Structure in Peter Carey’s Fiction,” *Australian Literary Studies* 11.2 (1983): 199: “They both [Bliss and Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*] signify that all we can retain of past reality is words and that these in fact have a very tenuous relationship with that ‘reality’.”

Oscar and Lucinda as a Revisionist Historical Novel:
“The Empire had not been built by choirboys”

Finally, the question arises of the extent to which the themes and narrative modes of representation used for the fictional treatment of Australian colonial history in Oscar and Lucinda allow conclusions to be drawn about the view of history implied in the novel. The selection of topics helps to draw the reader’s attention to the lives of people who had hitherto been neglected in historical writing. The anachronous temporal structure, episodic narrative mode and close consideration of Aboriginal experience all support the revisionist tendency of the novel to rewrite the history of the fifth continent from the viewpoint of the historical losers. The use of multiperspectival narration formally expresses an experience of history characterized by fragmentation, subjectivity and scepticism and thus illustrates – through literature – the “impossibility of history in the singular.” In both Illywhacker and Oscar and Lucinda, narrative features such as plot structure, the presentation of characters and society, and narratorial mediation are carefully employed to unveil cultural stereotypes and the models applied by British colonialism to make sense of the world. Both novels combine reworkings of Australian history with a critical analysis of the ideological foundation of colonialism and with an implied exposure of the limits of a eurocentric viewpoint.

By including themes from daily life, history of mentalities and women’s history and by deconstructing central myths of Australian history as collective fictions, Carey’s novels display the essential features of a new type of post-colonial historical fiction. Illywhacker and Oscar and Lucinda can be considered as belonging to the new type of revisionist historical novel summarized by Brian McHale:

The postmodernist historical novel is revisionist in two senses. First, it revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Second, it

27 Carey, Oscar and Lucinda, 475.
28 Bill Ashcroft features a similar approach in his article “Against the Tide of Time: Peter Carey’s Interpolation into History,” in Writing the Nation: Self and Country in the Post-Colonial Imagination, ed. John C. Hawley (Critical Studies 7; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996): 194–212. He sees Carey as a “postcolonial writer” whose “interpolation into the narrative of history […] insinuates itself into the ‘facts’ of history in such a way as to challenge the status of ‘factuality’” (198).
revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself.\footnote{30}

By placing all available narrative means at the disposal of his revisionist fiction-making, Carey succeeds in enhancing the historical novel’s capacity as an effective medium for criticizing civilization.

The themes and narrative structure of *Oscar and Lucinda* express a revisionist perception of history which shifts the emphasis from the public to the private, attaches importance to the experiences, patterns of life and thought of ordinary people, and casts doubt on the basic assumptions of positivist historiography. With this unconventional historical novel, Carey reminds us that the colonial history of Australia doesn’t just consist of political or economic facts but has to be considered as a holistic cultural phenomenon that pervades all aspects of life. His marked interest in outsiders, minorities and historical losers allows his novel to mount an implicit appeal for a more tolerant attitude towards other cultures and mentalities and thus sharpens our awareness of human diversity. By showing how dangerous thinking in categories like ‘confession’, ‘class’, ‘race’ and ‘gender’ can be, he restores us to the humanistic core of our humanity.

In view of the persistence of nationalism, racism, religious fanaticism, sexism and political power-seeking, the episodes from Australian colonial history featured in *Oscar and Lucinda* can also be regarded as analogues of present-day conflicts. This is one of the reasons for the immediate relevance of this novel to the present – something that has been demanded of the historical novel ever since Lukács. Carey’s fictional presentation of Australian colonial history relates to our present times for two more reasons. First, as historiographic approaches such as the history of everyday life, women’s history and the history of mentalities have succeeded in doing in recent years, *Oscar and Lucinda* questions positivist views of political history. Second, at a time when the boundary between reality and fiction is becoming increasingly blurred and when narrativity is once again gaining currency in representations of history, Carey’s sceptical and revisionist analysis of the cultural heritage of Australia reminds us that the crisis of faith experienced in the nineteenth century is echoed in the epistemological insecurity of the present.

WORKS CITED


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The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith

Bill Ashcroft

The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith is Peter Carey’s liveliest and most unrelenting reflection on the postcolonial dilemma of Australian society. No other contemporary novel addresses so many postcolonial issues in Australian culture. Many novels have shared the nationalist concern with the hegemony of British colonization. Some depict the global dominance of the USA. But few have demonstrated with such mischievous clarity the historical connection between these forms of colonial control, the mendacity of Australian political life, and the ambivalence of the relationship between Australia and its political masters. As Australia once again slavishly follows an imperial power into an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state, the novel seems exceptionally topical.

Tristan Smith is driven by a consuming cultural thesis: that all culture, identity, and the power relationships they invoke are a product of simulation. In this respect Tristan’s story inhabits one of the most fraught and contested spaces in postcolonial studies: the interface between the material experience of colonization and the necessary discursive strategies by which that experi-

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1 Reading Tristan Smith with a postgraduate class when it first appeared, I was shown a copy of a review that offered the opinion that the novel “reads like an Empire Writes Back casebook.” The review went on to outline some of the important postcolonial features of the novel, claiming: “each of these devices is like a signpost on the road leading to a ‘post-colonial reading’ of the text.” The critical blindness of this view is the failure to see that Tristan Smith is a reading as much as a writing; a ‘reading’ of contemporary cultural relations. It doesn’t simply propose a reading; it is a reading and, as such, enters, rather than exposes itself to, the field of theoretical discourse.
ence is formed. How do we reconcile the very real material and political consequences of domination with the symbolic order in which that domination is maintained? How do we avoid the postmodern reduction of political struggle to the field of the sign? For Carey, the whole arena of cultural identification is a kind of theatre in which enormous political struggles are played out in various acts of performance. This reaches its peak when Tristan, a mutant colonial monstrosity of uncertain parentage, who can neither walk nor talk properly, puts on the suit of a “Simi” – a simulacrum of Bruder Mouse – and becomes the central figure of Voorstand myth. The long narrative seems to hinge on this bizarre and astonishingly successful act of dissembling, because Tristan is, quite clearly, an embodiment of the colonized culture. But simulation lies at the centre of the book’s much broader thesis about the postcolonial struggle over representation.

The function and power of simulation reaches into every arena of life. Acting and performance, juggling and role-playing, acrobatics and holograms, ‘posturing’ and disguise, are indispensable to the cultural struggle that forms the major contest of the novel – the struggle between the indigenous Feu Follet Theatre and the global Saarlim Sirkus. Theatre is the perfect model of cultural production and cultural difference, for culture is manifestly performed. But the performativity of culture extends to an almost carnivalesque excess of simulation in the activities of individuals and groups. Duplicity, deception, deviousness, delusion, fantasy, mimicry, disguise, cross-dressing, pretence, caricature, illusion, self-delusion, cyborgs, myth (cyborgs as the continuing presence of myth), even the simulation of cyborgs – all these things feature in the story at some stage, and they characterize the nature of all human social and cultural (and even personal) relations. Nothing is as it seems – all representation, identity, all being itself seems to be a matter of performativity and role-playing, a function of the discrepancies and malleability of language.

All this makes the novel appear to be a flamboyant excursion into Baudrillard’s theory of the precession of simulacra. Baudrillard’s thesis is that ‘postmodern’ culture is a world of signs that have broken away from any ‘reality’. Simulacra – copies without an original – are not just ‘pretending’, they produce the same symptoms, signs and images as the real and they become the determinant of our perception of reality. They ‘precede’ the real. They are the real for us: their ideal models presented through the media dictate all homes, relationships, fashion, art, and music. Roxanna, for instance, only realizes how beautiful Felicity is when she sees her on television. But however

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strongly the novel invokes Baudrillard’s thesis, I want to suggest that Carey’s simulacra have a very different, much more positive, political function.

For Baudrillard, the breakdown of the boundary between simulacrum and reality creates a world of hyperreality in which the distinctions between the real and unreal are blurred, and because the simulacra ultimately have no referents, the social begins to ‘implode’. This process of social entropy leads to the collapse of all boundaries between meaning; and the collapse of the social distinction between classes, political parties, cultural forms, the media and the real. We see such a situation in the crazed mind of Peggy Kram and her dystopic postmodern Saarlim city: Tristan, disguised as Bruder Mouse, is the mouse; the “Ghostdorps” Peggy operates as theme parks to the Great Historical Past are that past. At one level, we see Baudrillard’s thesis operating very nicely in Saarlim city: the seedy metropolis is a network of simulacra woven into a social fabric of posturing, pretence and “giddy insincerity.” Saarlim, however, is not just a postmodern dystopia; it is the natural outworking of a mythic history that characterizes the whole of Voorstand culture as a monumental structure of self-delusion. Carey’s Voorstand begins to look uncannily prophetic as a traumatized post-September 11 USA rapidly finds the boundaries between fantasy and reality crumbling. But the book reminds us that the land of Hollywood and Disneyland has always celebrated its capacity for simulation and fantasy.

But there is a difference between Baudrillard’s view of simulacra and Carey’s that hinges on the politics of simulation. Baudrillard sees the world of hyperreality as a political disaster. For him, when simulation and simulacra become the real, there are no stable structures on which to ground a theory of politics. Culture and society become a flux of undifferentiated images and signs. The kind of popular music that originates in social resistance, for instance, becomes dissipated into the hyperreal world of the media. ³ Film images of war and atrocity effectively ‘silence’ their reality.⁴ But the limita-

³ The actual musicians are turned into simulations on MTV, which essentially snuffs out their potential resistance to social tyrannies. They no longer have a specific historical context through which they arose, and no longer refer to a situation that brought on individual expression and individual resistance. For example, putting gangsta-rap music on the screen completely takes it out of its historical and social context. This takes away the ‘reality’ of the historical context, and replaces it with ‘hyperreality’, a world in which the boundaries between dominance and resistance collapse.

⁴ The process of simulacra in film has a sinister consequence: the television series Holocaust continues the act of extermination by an elaborate process of forgetting (see Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, tr. Sheila Glasser (Simulacres et simulation, 1981; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994): 49); the film Apocalypse Now an extension of war by other means, “with the same immoderation, the same excess of means, the same monstrous candour […] and the same success” (59). We may also see
tion of Baudrillard’s pessimism lies in his presumption that there is a world with only one culture – postmodern culture. For Carey, the issue is also political, but whereas Baudrillard sees simulacra as the end of representation, Tristian Smith presents the field of representation as the theatre of cultural struggle itself.

Simulacra are important to struggle because culture is a theatre, and cultural struggle a contest of theatres. All our most heartfelt identifications to culture, nation, self, identity generate our experience because they first operate at the level of representation. Not only simulation, but also representation – indeed, thought itself – precedes and shapes experience. Vincent believes that “what you thought could change society” (57). This doesn’t make cultural struggle any less intensely experienced, but it does reveal the importance of representation to postcolonial struggle. In fact, the book situates itself at the juncture of the postmodern and the postcolonial in presenting two dimensions of simulation, a postmodern field of simulacra in which all meaning implodes and about which nothing can be done; and a postcolonial field of representation in which simulation and performativity become the strategies of cultural struggle. For Baudrillard, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody […]. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”

This makes intuitive sense to us. We know the power of the media and its love affair with untruth. We know the way simulacra can count as reality even when we know they are not real. This is not dissimilar from facts themselves. There are no such things as ‘pure facts’, but there are things that count as facts because they are located in a discourse. We have experienced two Gulf Wars: the first a dizzying display of simulation, the second, a journey through ever-widening circles of delusion. The problem then becomes one of degree. Do simulacra, by displacing the real, totally inhibit the capacity for political and material action, as Baudrillard suggests? Or do contesting simulations operate within the field of representation, as we may deduce from a postcolonial reading? Clearly, for postcolonial writers, for whom the struggle over represen-
Simulation is critical, political action is not necessarily inhibited by the field of simulation. The problem with Baudrillard’s view is the implicit assumption that there is some transcendental real not affected by the processes of signification (ie, by ‘simulation’).

This uncovers a postcolonial dimension of the novel far more subtle and far-reaching than the overt and covert allusions to Australia’s colonial history. Cultural identity, around which an entire history of colonial struggle has revolved, in discourses of place, history, language, art and aesthetics, is a field of simulacra. That is to say, cultural identity is always a field of performance specifically directed at the performance of cultural difference. The link between performativity and self-representation makes the trope of the theatre particularly significant in the novel. But the issue is not one of pretence. Simulation opens up the importance to the postcolonial society of taking hold of the signs of self-representation, of interpolating the dominant field of representation as a mode of resistance.

The issue on which the novel develops its thesis is the radical instability, or malleability, of the discourses of representation. Carey develops the phenomenon of simulation in two ways: first, in his management of the discursive apparatus of culture; and, second, in the centrality of the theatre theme in the book. The cultural apparatuses most in evidence in the novel are the literary production itself, the map, and the footnote, which simulate the authorial gaze, place and history. A simulation that undermines and indeed parodies their authority interpolates each one of these discourses.

*Tristan Smith*, the book, simulates its own function as a postcolonial novel by mimicking the voice of the postcolonial author. It draws attention to the dual gaze of such an author by constantly addressing a Voorstand audience while never allowing us to forget the difference between the Efican and Voorstand reader. “We grow up with your foreignness deep inside our souls” (292), he says at one stage; “It was through your charm and expertise that you conquered us” (294); “we are strategically important to you but you have never heard of us” (299). By appropriating the language of Voorstand, by constructing the Voorstandish audience, the novel simulates the capacity of the colonized subject to communicate an ontological condition, to “speak truth to power,” as Edward Said says. The novel demonstrates the apparatus of cultural address, which is crucial to postcolonial writing. It implicates itself in a deep web of Australian grievances against the USA while directing itself at a US audience.

The second apparatus, the map, is in some ways the ultimate simulation, because this sign creates the reality of place, creates knowledge of place, and imputes ownership by the mapmakers. Seeing the map of Efica, we know it. Indeed, we are obsessed with maps because they offer such a concrete simula-
ation of knowledge. But what do we actually know? The map of Efica is already, because it is a map, a sign of the power of mapmakers, of those who have had the power to construct place by mapping it and naming it, the palimpsest of colonization inscribed by various powers as they have taken turns controlling it.\footnote{It is interesting that Baudrillard opens his essay on the precession of simulacra with a discussion of a Borges fable in which cartographers draw a map in such detail that it ends up covering exactly the real territory of the empire (\textit{Simulacra and Simulation}, 1). The map frays as the empire declines. The reality and the abstraction (the map) decline together. This is reminiscent of, and probably influenced, Carey’s story “Do You Love Me?” in which an absence of love makes the map and its attendant reality both disappear. Baudrillard uses the breakdown of the connection between the map and the territory as a parable of the breakdown between simulacra and the real. But clearly the simulacrum of the map creates, rather than reproduces, ‘reality’. We only have to look at maps from different cultures to see that the map is both sign and simulacrum. The ‘knowledge’ it signifies is entirely constructed.}

Maps simulate knowledge itself by signifying the boundaries of place. We might speculate that all knowledge is a form of simulation because it is a product of representation.\footnote{Michel Foucault has provided well-known examinations of the discourses in which knowledge of madness and sanity has been constructed. This becomes particularly relevant to the implosion of imperial discourse later in the novel, which occurs as a failure of discrimination of different orders of simulation.} But the particular forms of knowledge on which maps are predicated make them particularly powerful simulacra/signs of cultural control. Such control has been forcefully demonstrated by their power to convince the colonized of the reality of the dominant representation: the colonizer’s view was the way the world was, even if his view was a failure to see — “a foreigner could pass through this landscape of countless dreary little cactus plants and see nothing” (83). Efica is not ‘simply there’ but a place that has been continually written and re-written. The sign of imperial inscription is the simulation of spatial knowledge. Place is critical to colonial societies, first, because the space itself is the initial site of dominance, but more importantly because the tangible ground of ‘presence’ can also be seen to be subject to the processes of colonial ‘simulation’.\footnote{Carey canvasses various ways in which place, its habitation and representation impact on postcolonial societies: the very palpable extension of Voorstand hegemony into Efica in the 2400 miles of insulated cable running through it (fn 33); the architecture of Belinda Burastin “whose domestic dwellings perfectly reflect the liberal post-colonial conundrum […]. They are as light as thoughts, prayers, wishes that history had been otherwise” (fn 125); the absurd cultural displacement of Jaqui’s father who transports truckloads of snow every Christmas to his front lawn to have a ‘real’ Christmas (323–27).}

The third apparatus is the footnote. Tristan mimics authoritative scholarly discourse with an intellectual apparatus of footnotes, references and glossary
to make the point that the apparatus itself signifies (simulates) the authority of the discourse. Carey is fascinated with history, with its power to construct reality and its capacity to embody power itself. This power is embodied in a way of telling. History lays claim to a scientific and factual recapitulation of reality purely by virtue of the scholarly apparatus it deploys in its service. In this way, the entire edifice of Efican reality is built upon the simulated foundation of authentic historical record. Hence, while other histories, the indigenous peoples and their languages have been “consigned to history” (9), history can be interpolated to construct an alternative reality to the Voorstand narrative.

The dominance of Voorstand history is the basis of the dominance of its popular culture in the Sirkus, the basis for its belief in the rightness of its dominance over others. The myth of the Great Historical Past is a justification for the overwhelming belief that “we are the land of morality, the land of the free, the justice of our dominance lies in our rightness.” The confusion of history, myth and fantasy lies deep within the Voorstand psyche and underpins its elaborate construction of national identity. Nothing demonstrates this better than Peggy Kram’s belief that Tristan is Bruder Mouse himself, come to visit from the Great Historical Past. Clearly, simulation and self-delusion have a long provenance in Voorstand. Saarlim certainly may be collapsing into hyperreality, but Tristan’s invasion can be seen as the capacity to invade the field of simulation itself with counter-reality. Tristan’s ‘invasion’ of this field is precisely the process in which alternative histories are engaged.

Peggy, who owns the historical theme parks called Ghostdorps, thinks she alone knows what the Great Historical Past was like, because history is her business (406). This rehearses Foucault’s linkage of truth and power. But it also supports Baudrillard’s contention that capital has always dominated at the level of the symbolic:

Capital, in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral or economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law.10

In the imperial enterprise, capital has always operated, and has best sustained itself, at the level of the symbolic. In Marxian terms, the hegemony of the ‘superstructure’ within empire has always been necessary for control of the economic ‘base’. In the postcolonial situation, this interpenetration of capital and representation is a significant and continuing site of struggle. Historical

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theme parks such as the Ghostdorps are a neat demonstration of the way in which capital achieves dominance within the symbolic order by packaging culture. No one would know what happened yesterday, as Peggy says, unless someone (literally and discursively) constructed that past and such construction determines the future. Where history is concerned, the simulacra are the real.

Art Culture and Imperialism: Theatre as Resistance

While writing, map and footnote focus our mind on the fact that the power of a discourse lies in its apparatus, its invocation of authority rather than its content, the most powerful model of simulation is the theatre itself. The central cultural struggle in the novel is that between the Efican Feu Follet and the global Saarlim Sirkus. Theatre is both the mode and the site of the Efican struggle for national identity. Felicity, a Voorstander who is a passionate Efican nationalist, demonstrates that performance of a role does not negate its emotional and cultural validity. Theatre is the mode of cultural performativity *par excellence*. As a representation of self, the performance is a necessary simulation, but it is a simulation nonetheless. The reliance on Shakespeare, the fact that Felicity herself is Voorstandish, shows that cultural identity is, and always must be, simulated – there is no essential identity; rather, cultural difference is the key to the performance of identity.

*The Theatre of History*

History is a product of theatre in the novel because it is deeply implicated in the performance of identity. The production of history in creative work is a common postcolonial strategy and one that Carey employs regularly. But the trope of the theatre operates very differently in Carey’s view of history from the way it does for, say, Paul Carter. For Carter, the very problem with traditional, imperial, empirical history is that it is reported as though it occurs on a stage: “Australia was always simply a stage where history occurred, history as theatrical performance.”¹¹ The problem with this theatre is that the stage is neutral: “It is not the historian who stages events, weaving them together to form a plot, but History itself.”¹² History is simply a collection of trans-cendental facts that may be observed unfolding on a stage. This, of course, rel-egates the ‘performance’ itself to a neutral event. This is completely opposite to the way history is performed in Carey. The theatre, namely, maintains its value, precisely because it is performative – a performance that gains its

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vitality by virtue of the time and conditions of its enactment. For the Feu Follet, history is a constantly adjusted performance conducted on a field of battle. It is not just performative, but contestatory. This is the way in which the Feu Follet claims to ‘invent’ the culture of Efica (50). But its high seriousness is its undoing – while the actors understand the nature of the conflict, they fail to understand its dimensions: “They saw only surfaces. They did not see history lurking in the dark” (207).

Culture and Popular Culture

When F.R. Leavis conducted his last-ditch defence of English literary culture in the 1930s, it was, despite his appeal to the bucolic Englishness of the rural village, a defence of British- and European-dominated High Culture against the US-dominated popular culture. American popular culture has become, to many analysts, the popular culture of the world. The Saarlim Sirkus, a metaphor for the Hollywood film industry, is the focus in the novel of the neocolonial dominance of culture by the USA. The Sirkus, so deeply grounded in the moral foundations of the Great Historical Past, has gained a popularity that threatens to undermine the indigenous Efican theatre just as it has enveloped Efican culture. The story is a familiar one, but the response of Eficans, both in production of a version of the Saarlim Sirkus and in the consumption of the product, demonstrates a capacity for transformation that goes unnoticed in most views of the struggle.

The theatre may be ‘inventing’ rather than merely performing Efican culture (50), but the two are the same thing. The performance of cultural difference is a critical act of resistance. When Bill Millefleur deserts to work for the Saarlim Sirkus, he is going to work in the interests of “the enemy” (50). But its high seriousness cannot hide the ambivalence of the Feu Follet’s invention of Efican identity. An ambiguous mix – of indigenous circus skill, Shakespeare plays and local productions – is deeply complicated by the fact that the cast and supporters are all attracted to Voorstand culture. Vincent, for instance, wants Efica to be free of Sirkus. “But also – he loved the Sirkus. […] He was a serious scholar of Voorstand culture, painting, music, literature” (56–57). Felicity gives her son the mask of the mouse, the embodiment of everything she loathed about Voorstand culture. When railing against Voorstand, “No one who watched the speech would have believed that she had dressed her own son in the visage of the enemy” (180). “My Maman obviously held more complex feelings for Bruder Mouse than she had ever admitted to the collective” (185). Such an ambivalent relationship with the global hegemony of popular culture is immediately recognizable.

When Wally finally takes Tristan, Roxanna and Sparrow to the Sirkus, they all feel like traitors. Even while hating its cultural imperialism, the four
are entranced by the simulation of the Sirkus. And, indeed, the Sirkus with its lasers and holograms is the epitome of the simulacra of popular culture – its fantasy, its simulation of life, its escapism; most of all, the Sirkus captures the imagination:

But few of the critics at the Feu Follet ever saw a Sirkus. Certainly not the Water Sirkus. They therefore overlooked the vital thing – the Sirkus is thrilling. Would it have captured half the world if it were not? (342)

Tristan’s first visit to the Sirkus in Chemin Rouge is a parable of the power of culture to produce consent. Struggling with his mother’s condemnation of the Sirkus as “a horror made of cardboard, plastic and appalling colours, a death-dealing construction of hardened chewing gum, and degraded folklore” (163), Tristan enters the familiar struggle of the culturally invaded, the struggle between the intellectual awareness of the political ramifications of culture on the one hand, and the experience of simple wonder on the other:

It was no good to say what Vincent said, that the modern Bruder Mouse had become nothing more than a logo-type, the symbol for an imperialist mercantile culture. [...] he had never been to the Sirkus in his own home town. He did not know Bruder Mouse. He had never seen him move. (167)

This observation puts its finger on the precise point of conflict in cultural domination, the aporia between intellectual opposition and the emotional attraction of cultural fantasy. “Our stories seemed bigger when she [Irma, an Efican addition to the Saarlim Sirkus] recited them” (168). But it is up to Sparrow to encapsulate the emotional foundation of Efican (and Australian) repulsion and attraction to Voorstandish culture:

“They’re a great people,” he continued doggedly. “That’s what we keep forgetting when we’re trying to get their hands out of our guts. That’s what a show like this teaches you. [...] What you can still see in this Sirkus is their decency. I’d forgotten it. I spend all my time thinking about their hypocrisy. You don’t see decency when their dirigibles are bombing some poor country who tried to negotiate their Treaty.”

“Why does it have to teach you?” Roxanna said. “Why can’t you just enjoy it?” [...]. “You would think we had so much in common, but we’re the little brother – we love them, but they don’t notice us. [...] We love their heroes like they were our own, but we keep forgetting that we don’t count with them.” (168–69)

Sparrow’s feelings of ambivalence lie at the heart of all centre–margin relationships, but particularly at the heart of settler-colony colonialism, in which the attractions and repulsions can be stronger because held so carefully in balance. In this sense, Felicity, herself a Voorstand migrant, but so passionate
in her rejection of its cultural dominance, is the mother who represents the nation to Tristan. Both nation and empire are tyrannical in their own way. But their implication in each other is labyrinthine: when Tristan smashes the mouse mask Felicity had, paradoxically, given him, she consoles him: “As if it were not her fault. As if it had not been her cultural imperialism, her hegemony, her hatred of the Sirkus, which had guided my hands in its destruction” (170).

These complex feelings are there for all Eficans, and the attraction to the dominant culture exists even when they consume that culture differently. But it is in the difference of consumption, perhaps even in consumption as a cultural strategy, that we see the possibility of transformation: “when we Eficans watch the Voorstand Sirkus we do not watch like you.” Says Tristan, “We watch with our mouths open, oohing and aahing and applauding just as you do, but we watch like Eficans, identifying with the lost, the fallen, the abandoned” (136). The Efican consumption of the Voorstand product can be more than merely a response. Consumption is a cultural act, a process that can transform the cultural discourse or product being consumed. When Eficans perform the Sirkus, for instance, or when the Sirkus performs in Efica, the local heroine Irma transforms the production into something much more in tune with the local culture:

She alone, of foreign performers, dared recite our own stories on the stage. It was the mark of the skill of your Sirkus managers to everywhere adapt the show to what was local. We did not know there was no Irma in any of the Saarlim Sirkuses. (167)

A complaint of the Saarlim Sirkus Convention is that Sirkus managers adapt to local conditions, sometimes fracturing the character and reducing its mythic status (339). This appropriation is far from being a completely successful strategy of resistance, but it does suggest something of great importance to the colonized society: the capacity to make the dominant cultural discourse work for you. But hybridity can be a two-edged sword. On one hand, the local culture can transform the global; on the other, the dominant culture can just as easily adapt itself to the local to keep the locals enthralled. This conceals the fact that the moral and religious basis of the Sirkus (165) may be fine for Voorstand but distorted and oppressive when it is transported by imperialism.
Tristan as Colonial Abject

It is precisely at this point of ambivalence that the issue of simulation finds its political purchase. Is the mimicry of Voorstand popular culture simply a slavish copying, or does the mimicry maintain an element of menace, as Homi Bhabha puts it, that might destabilize and transform the dominant discourse? The answer to this lies in Tristan himself, who embodies so garishly the dysfunctionality of colonial culture. A mutant, a horror, a child whose paternity is unclear, whose mother’s identity is ambivalent, who cannot walk or speak properly or look after himself, is the colonial abject who occupies a central place in the imperial myth. As he oscillates between Hairy Man and Bruder Mouse – the embodiments of evil and good in Voorstand culture – he reveals the ambivalence that also lies at the heart of imperial power. The flamboyant excess of Tristan’s abjection keeps our eyes firmly fixed on his allegorical nature.

Tristan is, from the beginning, the literal embodiment of colonial otherness. His theatrical debut comes when his mother defiantly uses him in the witches scene in the Feu Follet production of *Macbeth*. When Macbeth enters with Banquo, Felicity, the first Witch, holds Tristan up:

> “Thou shalt get Kings, though thou be none,” she said, and thrust me out into the world.

> ENTER TRISTAN SMITH – a gruesome little thing, slippery and sweating from his long enclosure in that rubber cloak, so truly horrible to look at that the audience can see the Witches must struggle to control their feelings of revulsion. (31)

The witches, themselves marginal, demonized outsiders, produce this deformed, almost demonic postcolonial subject. Tristan represents the deformity of cultural ambivalence that comes from the curious mix of attraction and repulsion Efica has for its neocolonial dominator.

The theatre trope raises a further fact about cultural performativity – simulation requires a context, a discourse that can direct the gaze and make the performance real. Tristan can be a brilliant Hairy Man in the theatre, but when he climbs out of the hospital window, performing the Hairy Man to himself, the look in the eyes of the people on the ground tells him “properly, fully, for the first time in my life – I was a monster” (156). This reminds us of Fanon’s discovery, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of his own monstrous blackness as it appears in the gaze of the white onlooker. He describes the experience of being interpellated by a white child: ‘‘Look, a Negro!’’ – a statement that destroys his former wholeness; “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored […]. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad […] the
Negro is ugly.”13 The gaze is therefore crucial to the construction of identity. While Carey has no recourse to an image of racialized difference in his description of Tristan, he nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which the body operates as a metonym for the objectifying gaze of Empire.

The simulation of identity, the seizure of self-representation for the postcolonial subject, is to control the gaze by controlling the theatre of representation. It is ironic that Tristan’s one chance to become an actor is to play the part for the Hairy Man – Voorstand culture and myth have already provided a place for the deformed, mutant postcolonial subject. This is also true in the Feu Follet repertoire: one of his favourite parts is Caliban (377), a signature role for the postcolonial re-readings of the canon, and a direct statement of his colonial subjection. But one powerful consequence of his simulation of Bruder Mouse in Saarlim is that by invading the discourse of Voorstand myth he controls the gaze: he becomes Bruder Mouse. Peggy’s horror at discovering him is directed by this discourse – she perceives him as the Hairy Man once he is no longer Bruder Mouse.

The Simulation of Language

Tristan’s body marks him as the mutant Other, the horror at the edge of humanity. But there is another, even deeper signifier of the otherness of the colonial, and that is language. When Bill Millefleur travels to Voorstand and stardom in the Sirkus he goes as an outsider, a colonist:

> he would need to abandon his soft, self-doubting Efican patois [...] learn to speak with a clip to his consonants [...]. To you he would be an exotic performer introducing live animals into the Sirkus. But to himself (and to us) our circus boy would be acting out, with his own body, the surrender of our frail culture to your more powerful one. He would be singing your songs, telling your stories, and this went strongly against the grain, undercut the whole notion of who he thought he was. (51–52)

But it is Tristan who best reveals the importance of language. His speech is so halting that few can understand him. It is his language as much as his gruesome appearance that ‘others’ him. Language is that which identifies by difference, and Tristan’s language sets him apart. When he finally catches up with his father, Bill, his language announces his ‘outsideness’, for even Bill cannot understand him:

Had he lived with me in Chemin Rouge each gurgle of my subsequent answer, each muddy slide of vowel, each slur of consonant, would also have been clear to him. But he listened to my answer like a stranger. (348)

It is critical to the success of Tristan’s simulation that he simulates language, for it is in language that culture – indeed, humanity itself – appears to reside. It is thus perfectly appropriate that he obtains a voice patch – “a ‘Two-pin Vocal Patch’ like the actors in the Water Sirkus” (376). This completes the density of simulation and becomes the one thing that allows him to interpolate Voorstand culture as Bruder Mouse.

Tristan’s travels in Voorstand are at one level the story of the Hairy Man becoming Bruder Mouse. Both are simulations, both require the management of the gaze, for it is in controlling that gaze that the boundary between the ‘real’ and the simulated becomes most problematic. The journey is an extended venture into the world of simulation: it begins with the deception of Jaqui’s attempts to turn Tristan into a terrorist, which unleashes the undercover world of the VIA. But Saarlim, centre of a culture built on myth and self-delusion, is a social world that operates entirely on pretence and insincerity. The novel is not fixated on the hyperreal world of Saarlim City (as Baudrillard might be, for instance). It demonstrates the critical function of representation – all of which is a form of simulation – in the struggle for political and cultural power that characterizes the postcolonial relationship.

At an even deeper level, Tristan’s travels to Voorstand demonstrate the extent to which the reviled and dominated Other resides at the centre of the self – the Hairy Man is the Bruder Mouse mythic hero. Simulation disrupts all discourses of essential being and demonstrates the ontological instability at the heart of empire. Tristan’s simulation of the Simi is the reductio of transculturation.

While Peggy Kram’s Saarlim seems to invoke Baudrillard’s Disneyland world, we need to make a distinction between this postmodern dystopia and the view that all contemporary culture is “the end of illusion.” “Disneyland is presented as imaginary,” says Baudrillard, “in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation.”14 We must understand that, as allegory, Peggy Kram is not simply crazy; she represents a postmodern world in which the simulacrum precedes the fact:

14 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 12.

we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterised by a precession of the model, of all the models based on the merest fact [...]. The facts
no longer have a specific trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all the models at once.\footnote{Baudrillard, \textit{Simulacra and Simulation}, 16–17.}

For Peggy, “illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.”\footnote{Simulacra and Simulation, 19.} She wants (at Bruder Mouse’s instigation) to buy Saarlim city and turn it into a giant Ghostdorp: “‘I’m going to give the citizens of Saarlim exactly what they need. Clean streets. Well-dressed people.’ [...] ‘I’ll let all the decent folk go about their business’” (408). Peggy wants to activate that principle of the simulacrum which sees the postmodern city as an extension of the theme park. “The impossibility of discovering an absolute level of the real,” says Baudrillard, “is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion.”\footnote{Simulacra and Simulation, 19.}

But while this may be true for Peggy it is not true for Tristan. Tristan is an actor. His simulation is like the difference between performance and performativity. His performance is ‘performativ’ in the sense that he acts out his identity as an actor, an identity that gives him a sense of worth. But he is never fazed by the separation between illusion and reality – he never believes he is Bruder Mouse. There may not be an “absolute level of the real,” but his interpolation of the dominant culture is always mediated by a sense of the difference between illusion and reality. The simple difference is that he comes from a different culture (for, globally powerful though it is, there are other cultural realities besides Saarlim’s). The disruptive invasion of Tristan’s performance of the Mouse keeps in sight Bhabha’s concept of the “menace of mimicry.” By dressing up as Bruder Mouse, he gets the attention he is longing for, but he never succumbs to the simulacrum.

Peggy remains locked into her (hyperreal) world of illusion, but the adventure has acted out a fundamental feature of postcolonial resistance. The dominant culture might be too popular to be resisted, but it can be interpolated; it can be disrupted; it can be transformed. By appropriating the stage of culture and of history, Tristan’s performance signifies the most powerful form of resistance – the transformative. Beneath the excess and the absurdity of the journey to Voorstand lies the recurring fact of the journey Said calls the “journey in” – both a physical journey to the metropolitan centre and a cultural journey into the imperial discourse. Both journeys lead to change at the destination, both journeys run the gauntlet between hegemony and mimicry, cultural essentialism and dilution. But both journeys reveal the power of the postcolonial subject within the flows and movements that characterize the contemporary globalized world. Although Tristan ends up outlawed and on
the run, this very mobility suggests the function of global movement and diaspora in destabilizing the hegemony of Voorstand.

WORKS CITED


Regarding *The Big Bazoohley*

**Pam Macintyre**

A small boy, his back to the viewer, walks towards an open doorway which leads into a long interior passage, lined with more doorways, that recedes into an indiscernible distance. The light radiating from the hallway provides a path for the boy to the inside that offers light and warmth from the swirling snow outside and the bleak city shadowed on the skyline. The hallway sits magically on the snowy landscape, intriguing in its swirling patterned carpets and carved doors, but one hesitates to read it as welcoming. It is a lonely interior that beckons to the boy, and while the threshold appears to call to adventure, it also suggests challenge and perhaps threat, represented not least by the looming city silhouette behind it. However, his regular footprints in the snow suggest that the boy is ready to embrace whatever is at the end of the hallway. Abira Ali, the illustrator of *The Big Bazoohley*, Peter Carey’s only children’s book, has in this image captured a clearer sense of the story than some reviewers and critics have managed to do.

*The Big Bazoohley*’s arrival to critical acclaim within the world of children’s literature confirmed it as very much in the tradition of fine writing for juveniles. It was an Honour Book in the 1996 Children’s Book Council of Australia Awards for Younger Readers, the Judges’ Report describing it rather earnestly as a “moralistic tale written in careful prose with wit and humour.”

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1 There were three separate publications of this title in 1995: New York: Henry Holt; St Lucia: U of Queensland P; and the one referred to in the present essay, London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber. The US and UK editions are finely illustrated by Abira Ali. There are only minor textual variations among the three editions.

Nine-year-old Sam Kellow is in Toronto in the middle of a snow-storm, staying with his parents at the King Redwood Hotel while they search for the buyer of one of his mother Vanessa’s miniature paintings. Sam’s father, Earl, is a gambler who hopes to win ‘the big bazoohley’, the Australian family being down to their last fifty-three dollars and twenty cents. In a dream, Sam finds himself on the Bloor Street subway platform, where he had been earlier in the day with his father; after some Alice-like experiences, he sleepwalks out of the hotel room, the door slamming behind him. Seeking help, he is taken in by a couple, Muriel and George, whose son, Wilfred, is unable to compete in the Perfecto Kiddo competition being held at the hotel, as he has chickenpox. The awful adults see an opportunity to get Sam to compete in Wilfred’s stead and still win the competition. Sam sees it as a chance to win the big bazoohley and save the family from financial ruin.

Reviewers and critics have read *The Big Bazoohley*, in the main, as an excellent story with strong child-appeal – “one of the most polished pieces of writing for any age I’ve come across recently”; “The magical whimsy and sly, exaggerated characterizations are very appealing.” ³ It is also described as a relatively straightforward tale whose central thematic and ideological thrust is readily grasped. Maurice Saxby says its theme involves the “ideological exposure of superficiality in society.” ⁴ Bruce Woodcock describes *The Big Bazoohley* as a story which “takes the big idea of adventurous risk-taking as its main idea [in a] whimsical and engaging tale.” ⁵ Nigel Krauth, seeing the “central issue” of the book as being money, places it in a group of children’s books including those by Roald Dahl and Paul Jennings which show “adults doing silly or monstrous or cruel things while they show kids being good and sensible and sensitive.” ⁶ Cathrine Harboe–Ree is alert to a greater subtlety here: “The authorial stance is clear [Carey is] opposed to the destruction of the childhood of any child exposed to the Perfect [sic] Kiddo competition treadmill, but Sam himself is portrayed as an overly responsible child wanting to rescue his rather feckless parents.” ⁷

Reviewers also delight in the humour: Maurice Saxby and Elizabeth Deveaux highlight the wit and playfulness of the narrative, Saxby saying that “*The Big Bazoohley* is bizarre, widely exaggerated and absurd; but it has originality, and [...] it delves deep into human experience, enlivening it with laughter, a


⁷ Harboe–Ree, “*The Big Bazoohley*,” 39.
Regarding The Big Bazoohley

sense of the extraordinary and of wonder,"⁸ and Deveraux noting how Carey “combines daring exaggeration with cosily wrought details for an exquisitely balanced comedy.”⁹ A lone voice of dissent comes from Carolyn Phelan: “The premise is thin, and the story keeps brushing close to fantasy without committing itself.”¹⁰

In sum, reviewers have seen the book as a satirical narrative with a clear underlying message – as a “multi-layered moral fable about risk-taking and misleading appearances.”¹¹ Almost unanimously, they agree that it is about an ordinary boy: “Sam Kellow, an Everyboy whose sheer normalcy provides ample ballast for the eccentricities of the plot,”¹² says Deveraux – an interpretation echoed by Geraldine Brennan, who describes Sam as “refreshingly normal.”¹³ Sam is interpreted as resisting attempts by a corrupt adult world to appropriate his childhood, and as taking a big chance to save his parents from financial ruin. Thematically, then, it is perceived as being about the significance of seizing opportunities pluckily, of a ‘normal’ childhood asserting itself against adult attempts to appropriate it.

It needs to be stated here that, with the exception of Woodcock, all these reviewers and critics operate professionally within the field of children’s literature. Of all the criticism that has been written about Peter Carey and his writing, only a very few commentaries (those of Woodcock, Anthony Hassall and Christer Larsson¹⁴) discuss his children’s book alongside his writing for adults; even then, Woodcock devotes less than one page of his 169 pages to it. Perhaps wide credence is given to Hassall’s opening remarks in his “Winners and Losers” article: “It is a truism of publishing that very few children’s authors can make the transition to writing popular and successful adult fiction.”¹⁵ While the works of Jane Gardam, Penelope Lively, Henning Mankell, Mordecai Richler, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jill Paton Walsh – to name but a few – throw Hassall’s ‘truism’ into question, nevertheless there is a wide-

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spread view that writing for children is a lesser craft than that of writing for adults.

*The Big Bazooholey* is discussed here largely as it is located within children’s – particularly Australian children’s – literature. It should be obvious that there are strong thematic connections with Carey’s writing for adults, but I will be arguing that the narrative and ideology of this ‘charming’ story for children are remarkably complex, intertextual and metafictive for a book aimed at readers of about Sam Kellow’s age. *The Big Bazooholey* may well be a playful, amusing story with “narration that is unselfconscious, clear, and direct, employing a vocabulary accessible to young readers,”16 but its major characteristics are unresolved ambiguities, ambivalences and complexities.17

The way in which Carey shapes nine-year-old Sam and his agency in the events surrounding him serves to unfold the various thematic complexities of the tale. There is no doubt, as Hassall acknowledges,18 that Carey is drawing on the ‘lost child’ motif powerful in Australian writing both for adults and for children. While Hassall identifies examples of the motif in Australian mainstream literature, it has also featured strongly in writing for children from colonial times,19 most commonly in terms of the child ‘lost in the bush’,20 the most famous real life example being that of the three Duff children who went missing in rural Victoria in 1864, and whose experiences inspired novelists and poets for the next half-century.21 A more contemporary resonance with the Stolen Generation, Australian Aboriginal children who were forcibly separated from their parents during much of the twentieth century, is evoked by George’s remark to Muriel, “You can’t just steal children.”22

Carey reconfigures the lost-child topos by having a child lose its orientation in a plush hotel, a symbol of an affluent Western society that hems in its children within boundaries drawn by adults. In addition, he complicates the lost-child motif by making Sam not so much lost as appropriated and – to make the situation more knotty – as being complicit in that appropriation, in

17 For a comprehensive examination of *The Big Bazooholey* within Carey’s oeuvre, see Hassall, “Winners and Losers,” 117–20.
19 For example: O.F. Timins, *Station Dangerous* (1866); Sophia Tandy, *The Children in the Scrub* (1878); *Dot and the Kangaroo* by Ethel Pedley (1899); *Three and Ma Kelpie* by Margaret McGuire (1964); and, more recently, Sonya Hartnett, *Thursday’s Child* (2000) and *Of a Boy* (2002).
20 Carey uses this trope in *Illywhacker* when Badgery’s daughter, Sonia, is lost after falling down a mine shaft.
22 Carey, *The Big Bazooholey*, 50. Further page references are in the main text.
order to save his parents and himself from humiliation. Sam’s transformation from grubby boy to curly-haired perfection is effected by the grotesque and rapacious Mildred (a theatrically monstrous mother-figure à la Roald Dahl) and the emasculated George, representing respectively both the actively awful and weakly acquiescent aspects of the colonizing adult and, metonymically, the colonizing, capitalist culture that commodifies its children. It is no accident that the story is set in Canada rather than the USA. Carey is positioning Canada, like Australia, as a postcolonial society, but one whose culture is perceived by the wider world as less distinctive than that of Australia. Being geographically close to the USA, it is perceived as in the thrall of that culture, and as being embraced by the term ‘North American’.

As intimated earlier, the central strength of The Big Bazoohley for its young readers lies, for most critics, in the ordinary boy asserting his child’s ordinariness in order to subvert adult attempts to deny him that childhood. In the main, Sam’s ‘normalcy’ can be inferred from his appearance – his backwards baseball cap, ‘ordinary’ clothes, and grubby appearance. Wilfred, in wanting a baseball cap and “one of those sweaters with the numbers on the back” (60), makes it clear that being a ‘normal’ child means having the right uniform, one that comes straight from imperialist consumer culture. Sam is Australian, yet he wears a baseball cap and a basketball sweater. It is in the nature of children to identify with heroes, but one might assume that Sam might have sought his heroes from sports more widely supported in his home country, such as cricket or one of the three football codes – rugby, Australian Rules, and soccer. It appears that being normal involves acceding to what capitalist-imperialist society decrees. Sam acknowledges this directly when he says, “‘All kids wear baseball caps […] even in Australia, where I’m from. We play cricket, but we wear baseball caps’.” To which Wilfred responds aggressively and aggrievedly: “‘I’m American. I’m entitled to the cap’” (73).

One of the central themes of this book as well as of much of Carey’s adult fiction is the deceptiveness of appearances. Sam is a far from ‘normal’ boy, despite his baseball cap and his grubby face. When the story opens, he is presented as concerned about his family’s financial state, of which he has exact knowledge: “He knew what sort of a hotel you could stay in for fifty-three dollars and twenty cents, and it certainly wasn’t a hotel like the one his father drove up to” (5). So troubled is Sam that he feels physically ill, and takes on the adult concerns that his father recklessly dismisses. Hassall refers to this as Sam’s “being temporally deprived of his status as dependent child.”23 While this is true, things are also more narratively and ideologically complex than ‘temporally’ would suggest. Indeed, until a climactic spaghetti-throwing

scene, there are very few examples of Sam behaving as an ‘ordinary’ boy. He is as ‘unnatural’ a boy in his own way as those dressed up for the competition. He is in a constant state of worry about people noticing the poor state of his clothing, the family’s rapidly decreasing financial resources, and their reliance on peanut-butter sandwiches. His family travels constantly and Sam never knows whether they will be staying in a “palace or a fleapit, and in fact Sam knew plenty of both” (6). It is his father, Earl, whose description is more childlike – he performs magic tricks and plays cricket and baseball, underlining the role-reversal obtaining in the Kellow family.

Sam is locked in a state of worried childhood responsibility, symbolized by the interior setting of most of the action – underground railway stations (one is Queen Street), and inside the hotel (King Redwood), which is cocooned by the snow-storm. This regal nomenclature highlights the dual colonization of the Canadian setting – Britain and the USA. Sam cannot look out of the hotel room window, will not venture forth to go sledding at his father’s invitation, but stands in the hotel room attempting to see how much it is costing per night. Carey, eschewing any notion of romanticism, denies him the typical connection between child and the natural world. Sam’s father can offer little consolation other than a version of that great Australian cure-all ‘she’ll be right mate’ – his faith in chance. Foreshadowing narrative events, he tells Sam: “‘One thing I’ve found out in life is one door shuts, another door opens’” (20). Sam is also held to ransom by his perceived out-of-placeness in this hotel. He is worried at being exposed as his ‘real’ self, and his ‘real’ family as impostors: their affluence is only apparent, not actual. Carey positions Sam’s concern about public humiliation centrally and powerfully: when Sam is locked out of his hotel room, in his too-small pyjamas, the logical step of going to hotel reception is denied him. He is concerned that a public appearance in his shabby night attire will reveal that his family cannot afford to stay in such a hotel. So, while his embarrassment at being caught publicly in his pyjamas confirms his childishness, the complicating additional fear (exposure of impecuniousness) reinforces the parent–child duality.

Ironically, it is as a direct result of being appropriated and transformed that Sam is released from this state of caring for adults, of playing the sensible parent. It is the symbol of colonized childhood, the Perfecto Kiddo competition, that precipitates Sam into behaving as what Phillip Lopate calls a “real child,” subverting the attempted colonization of his childhood by the contest, and saving the fortunes of his parents. Hassall identifies an “ultimate irony” here – “that this triumph of the natural over the artificial is affirmed by the famous actor who is chief judge and who opts for the substance of childhood
rather than the Hollywood image of the precociously cute kid.” I see this irony differently – as complicating and contradictory. Mr Lopate, the chief judge, uses a voice and a phrase he has learned from his acting role as an army commander, in what one imagines is a blockbuster rather than arthouse film, entitled Invasion Force, to insist on his decision to override the other judges. Surely the title of the movie is intended to exaggerate the irony. It is mass culture that rescues Phillip Lopate, and his enacting of an artificial role that allows him to be himself and resist accession to the values imposed on him by Hollywood. Artifice is used to effect the ascendancy of real life “‘in human terms’” (128). In a double irony, it is this epitome of popular culture – a competition which draws on hollywoodized ideas of the perfect child – that leads to the locating of Mr de Vere, the buyer of high culture in the form of Vanessa’s paintings.

Dream and nightmare as surreal imaginings figure in Sam’s life as they do in the lives of other Carey characters. Sam’s dream, with its long, dark hallway and images of wet earth, is particularly Freudian. It is also cast as a parody of the quest as Sam fights his way through a forest of brooms and mops, and mountains made of cleaners’ rags. In this aspect it evokes Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), though the scale of the respective narratives differs considerably. However, the themes of metamorphosis, ambivalence, subjectivity formation, and the nightmarish and unstable world are common to both books. Alice has her adventures underground, while Sam’s are within a snowed-in hotel. As both books employ fantasy or magical realism, both are sites for contesting contemporary society and values, which, as Rosemary Jackson’s definition of the ‘fantastic’ suggests, is the function of genres of the fantastic.

In The Big Bazoohley’s dark moments, such as the nightmare, the humour of the quest-parody alerts us to the essential playfulness of the text. In the surreal world of the nightmare, M&Ms, sweet, seductive, addictive, colourful symbols of capitalist imperialism, become magical (this is dream, not reality!). The descriptions of them are reminiscent of Enid Blyton’s: “It was filled with something sweet and runny and golden, like honey, but much, much nicer” (27). The description of the slide and tunnel are also evocative of Blyton’s The Magic Faraway Tree books, although Carey’s slide operates differently from Blyton’s. Blyton’s Faraway Tree has a slide inside the tree which is used by the children to return from the magical lands at the top. For Sam, the slide

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26 Blyton, The Magic Faraway Tree (1943). There were three others, The Enchanted Wood (1939), The Folk of the Faraway Tree (1946), and Up the Faraway Tree (1951).
precipitates him across the threshold of his dream into reality, when he finds
the door which is the first opening to his recovery of self, although the quest
is only at its beginning (28).

As these connections with Blyton suggest, Carey’s tale is highly inter-
textual. Critics have variously made associations with Roald Dahl, Charles
Dickens, Kenneth Grahame and Paul Jennings, for example. Carey has said
that the imagined and the magical have always interested and motivated
him, starting with his early reading of Norman Lindsay’s classic Australian
children’s book *The Magic Pudding* (1918). In an article in *The Age*, Carey
says: “I’ve been reading *The Magic Pudding* all my life. We talk about
magic realism a lot now and here is a perfect example. There are stories within
stories […] it’s a masterful book and it’s really influenced me.” There are
few discernible narrative links between the two books. Perhaps the “cut and
come again Puddin’” is the ultimate child’s version of the big bazooohley –
food rather than fortune. Also, Albert the Puddin’ is constantly being stolen
and recovered in Lindsay’s novel, and Sam is lost, ‘stolen’ and restored in
Carey’s. The Puddin’, in the shape-changing tradition of the folktale, is able
to transform himself – something that is paralleled by Sam’s transformation
into Wilfred, into Perfecto Kiddo and, finally, into his true self. The books
share a climax based on judging – in Lindsay’s, it is in a courtroom of sorts,
in Carey’s a competition final, both of which are subverted hilariously by the
protagonists. The lampooning of adults and institutions in both books belongs
to an Australian tradition, and, as any reading of Dahl will reveal, equally
within a broader children’s-literature tradition.

While Lindsay’s and Carey’s stories display their very own tonality and
register, as would be expected of two books published seventy-seven years
apart, they share the ingredient of slapstick humour: Sam Sawnoff’s failed
back-flip, which results in Bill Barnacle’s face being submerged in the pudding,
is paralleled in Sam’s spaghetti fiasco, for example. Carey, in Chapter
Thirteen, employs a prolepsis which Hassall sees as functioning in the story to
“distance, and so contain, the fictional danger threatening the child prota-
gonist […] reminding readers young and old that it is only a story”; Larsson
pursues this use of prolepsis more specifically by examining its function
within narrative closure. I agree that the foreshadowing operates metafic-
tively – the narrator interrupts the narrative to address readers directly, to alert
them to the stories within the stories: this is constructed story, not real life

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27 Carey, “In Conversation” (Melbourne Writers’ Festival, 22 August 2003).
Christer Larsson, “‘Years Later’,” 176–77, for a full discussion of this use of prolepsis.
children. But the specific prolepsis of the painting also serves to frame the limitations of art, of representation, of narrative too, including Carey’s own: “It is a wonderful painting, and justly famous, but it cannot tell you that Sam Kellow’s borrowed shoes were pinching his feet [...] that his nose tickled. Or that his head itched.”

Similarly, near the end of *The Magic Pudding* Norman Lindsay interrupts the narrative metafictively, though it is one of the focalizers rather than the narrator who interrupts the story to address, not the reader directly, but his co-characters:

“For the point is,” continued Bill, lowering his voice, “here we are pretty close up to the end of the book and something will have to be done in a Tremendous Hurry, or else we’ll be cut off short by the cover.”

According to Alison Lurie, the subversive nature of the best children’s books is evident in classic texts, so perhaps it is no surprise that connections have been made between *The Big Bazoohley* and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). Michael O’Donoghue says of Mr de Vere and his mole-like characteristics: “Surely Mr de Vere must be an allusion to *Wind in the Willows*.” It is easy to agree. Mr de Vere is certainly described as “mole-like” throughout the story and is a middle-aged bachelor, much like Mole in Grahame’s story. In Sam’s dream, de Vere “was dressed in a red smoking jacket and gold slippers” (28). He also operates as the central marker of the ambiguity that permeates the novel, and perhaps best embodies the subversiveness posited by Lurie. Is he completely human? He is described in terms of his animal, mole-like features, his “long snouty face” (123) and “damp earth smell” (125). He lives underground, his apartment accessible only through a door marked “Cleaning,” and he often disguises himself as a cleaner. He illustrates Carey’s central notion that appearances are to be mistrusted. We are certainly invited to see his ‘mole’-like behaviour and ‘underground’ existence as puns, and he represents essential subversion: his fortune and his “entire worldwide marketing plan” (126) rest on the success of the Perfecto Competition. However, he is willing to acknowledge Sam as the winner and thus enact the ultimate subversion, the destruction of his fortune. But Mr de Vere’s twinkling eyes as he repeats “‘in human terms’” (128) am-

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30 Peter Carey, *The Big Bazooohley*, 90.
biguously suggest that he has something up his sleeve, or that events have been anticipated, or that “human” may well not apply to him entirely.

Within contemporary Australian children’s fiction, while connections have been made with Paul Jennings, Carey’s novel is closest to the books of Morris Gleitzman, who also employs humour and exaggeration, and many of whose protagonists resemble Sam – Gleitzman’s children, too, must assume adult responsibility in the face of its abrogation by feckless grownups, in such books as Two Weeks with the Queen (1989), Misery Guts (1991) and its sequels Worry Warts (1991) and Puppy Fat (1994), and Bum Face (1998). Like Carey, Gleitzman employs humour to deal with some of the fears of childhood. However, there is one major difference: where Gleitzman’s heroes are childish and naive, and have adult roles unhappily thrust upon them, Sam is wise beyond his years and suppresses his childish impulses.

However, while all these intertextual links are readily apparent, there can be no doubt that the strongest literary connections are with Roald Dahl, albeit without his pronounced misogyny. Hassall identifies clear links with The Witches (1983).35 Certainly Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964) comes to mind as well. It is through chance, through luckily finding the winning ticket in a lottery, that Charlie Bucket improves the fortunes of his family in Dahl’s story. Charlie, like Sam, is poor, though his poverty is presented as more extreme and systemic than Sam’s fluctuating fortunes. He is a much more passive player than Sam, who is active in his own and his family’s restoration. Like Matilda in the eponymous novel (1988), Sam is super-intelligent, at least as far as mental mathematical calculations are concerned. Matilda, like Sam, works to restore the financial situation of someone she loves, her teacher, Miss Honey, in opposition to the horrible principal, Miss Trunchbull. The grotesque Muriel is strongly Dahl-inspired, and is a not too distant, if not close, relative of Miss Trunchbull and Matilda’s parents in Matilda, Mrs Twit in The Twits (1980), and the intimidating and frightening Eva Ernst in The Witches. Muriel is a travesty of motherhood – selfish, greedy, exploitative – and illustrates another of Carey’s themes, rapacious capitalism. She is, after all, American, not Canadian. Carey mocks her savagely and the type of interventionist mothering she represents: “‘I was born to be a mother,’” she proclaims, and George recalls how she wiped his face the day he first met her (46). She is depicted as crazy, coquettish, even “girlish” when she is at her most predatory, greedy and nutty (46). She wears thick glasses, symbolic of her blinkered and limited view of the world. George has a “mild, indefinite face” (40) and a “strange high voice” (82) that positions him as emasculated, and Muriel as emasculating. She and George continually eat

Regarding The Big Bazooehley

M&Ms, avidly swallowing and devouring capitalist culture, readily seduced by its sweet emblem. When Muriel soars above the crowd shrieking like a harpy at the end of the novel, her fantastic transformation is thwarted only when she hits her head on the ceiling and falls, breaking her leg. The very symbol of her values turns on her.

It is tempting to see the portrayal of Muriel as misogynist, but Carey must be given the benefit of the doubt, as not all women in the story are so monstrous, though, admittedly, she is provided with no male equivalent. In fact, it is the males in the story who are granted prime agency: Sam, Phillip Lapote, Mr de Vere are the characters whose actions are pivotal to the narrative and its resolution. Even the timid George and oppressed Wilfred have significant actions given to them – teaching Sam to dance, for example. The positioning of the female in The Big Bazooehley is far more ambiguous. How do we read the fact that the aggressive colonizer of childhood is a version of the maternal? Also, while Vanessa Kellow loves her son, she is not instrumental in effecting his return to the family. Her artistry, while fascinating and appealing, has little intrinsic value; the value to her family of her artistic skills lies solely in their ability to appeal to the public, male world of power and wealth. Nancy, Sam’s partner in the disastrous Perfecto Kiddo competition, is kind and sympathetic, and is only a temporary entrant in the Perfecto competition: once she wins and can take her family to Jamaica, she will retire. This positions us to view her as set apart from the children, who readily capitulate to the pretence of the competition. However, her role in events is the exemplary passive one of female niceness and supportiveness.

So, while Sam is supported in his subversive actions, not least by a deus ex machina, he is ultimately a winner because he took a chance. As Mr de Vere says, “‘Oh, life is a gamble […] There is no doubt about it. Love, business, art – you have to take a chance’” (128). The Kellows are certainly not a conventional family, but live on the margins, supported by art and gambling, and can be seen as challenging typical mainstream values. Vanessa’s two differently coloured eyes, “the left bluish and the right brownish” (7), mark her difference and ambiguity. Despite her large hands, she paints tiny pictures, no larger than a matchbox (7). Earl is a gambler, not because he is in love with money, Carey tells us, but because “Money never bothered him” (6). Earl Kellow articulates this nonconformist existence to Sam, saying: “‘You thought your life was strange, huh?’” (23). The Kellows can be read as representing the periphery that disrupts the hegemonic centre of capitalist, consumerist and imperialist culture. But we now expect that this would be too clear-cut for Carey, and the characters are, of course, dependent on this cul-

36 Hassall “Winners and Losers,” 118.
ture: it is responsible for their reversal of fortune, and Sam at least does not want to be seen as a pretender while he is encased in it.

In this central positioning of the value of chance or risk in the narrative scheme, is Carey deliberately subverting the conventions of juvenile literature, which constructs rite-of-passage transitions and rewards that are based on individual merit? Well, not quite. Ultimately *The Big Bazoohley* accedes to the basic socializing impetus of mainstream children’s literature, and appears to conform to what Michael Rosen calls “a golden rule of children’s fiction – restoration after conflict or transformation.”37 Sam is returned to his appropriate place in the world and family and pursues the values of honesty, selflessness and caring. Or does he?

Woodcock sees Carey “as a fabulist or surrealist, as a post-modernist and as a post-colonial writer […] who exploits the literary, formal and thematic ambiguities afforded by this mixture, rather than offering easily decodable narratives.”38 *The Big Bazoohley*, despite being aimed at children in their formative reading years, is embraced by this categorization. For, while Carey appears to endorse the customary pattern in the end, the denouement is ambiguous. The imprisoning snow-storm has ceased, and Sam can now go outside into the streets of Toronto and assume his ‘real’ life. He has won the ten thousand dollars because he behaved spontaneously as a child, yet his final acts are to pay the hotel bill, hire a private detective to find Mr de Vere, and take his parents out for dinner. Surely there is a moral dilemma in his ‘big chance’ being all about winning money, and what Sam does with it suggests that his purpose is not as altruistic as it seems. It is related to his childish ego: Sam’s acts are consonant with his desire to avoid humiliation and embarrassment. He wants to have, and to be seen to be having, bombe alaska rather than peanut-butter sandwiches. Is his winning based on a childish act that is an aberration? Will he return to being the parent–child? Is his taking the chance to avoid personal embarrassment his truly childish act? Or is Carey suggesting that Sam is a new type of hybrid child, one who happily embraces and embodies both childish and adult-like behaviours, one who stands for a post-colonial society that incorporates and uses capitalist culture within its margins, thus shifting borders and creating new spaces? Certainly, the final image in the book of Wilfred flying off into an unknown future, but one that has no Perfecto Kiddo Competition, suggests fluid borders and boundaries, rather than absolute, unambiguous certainty.

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Criticism


Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*

An Aussie Story?

**ANNEGRET MAACK**

Peter Carey’s novels can be characterized by their “hybridity of form.” They combine “experiments in metafiction,” postmodernism understood as “the collapse of grand historical narratives” and revisionary historical writing,¹ as in his Booker Prize-winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, set in nineteenth-century England and Australia. In *Jack Maggs*, a novel set in early-nineteenth-century London, Carey blends the genres of historical novel, fictional biography and metafiction with an intensively marked intertextuality, borrowing characters and plot elements from Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. This latter novel concentrates on a period of three weeks, beginning 15 April 1837, at 6 o’clock precisely. At this time, *Jack Maggs*, the counterpart of Dickens’s convict Magwitch, illegally arrives in London in order to meet his adoptive son, Henry Phipps (Dickens’s Pip), who, with Maggs’s money, has been educated to become a Victorian gentleman. Phipps, however, tries to evade his benefactor by all possible means. This essay explores Carey’s debt to Dickens, his re-creation of historical London, and his metafictional blending of narratives. In addition, it sounds out the question of whether Carey’s narrative transforms this material from an imperial into an Aussie story.

Dickensian Rewrite?

Along with Shakespeare, Dickens is one of the most rampantly plundered authors in English literature. Ever since his first novels were published, they have been plagiarized, adapted, and adorned with ‘prequels’ and ‘sequels’. Dickens was and remains present in the literature of Australia. In Carmel Bird’s *The Bluebird Café* (1990), the Victorian author becomes a contemporary to whom the novel’s protagonist writes letters. Michael Noonan’s *Magwitch* (1982) is an interpolation filling the time-gap before the final chapter of Dickens’s novel, and recounts Pip’s sojourn in Australia and his recovery of a second Magwitch fortune. Carey’s *Jack Maggs*, by contrast, can be called neither prequel nor sequel nor interpolation. Carey uses elements from *Great Expectations*, but he also introduces, in the figure of the author Tobias Oates, a counterpart to Dickens himself. Carey comments on his borrowed characters, Magwitch and Pip, as follows:

I wanted to reinvent [Magwitch], to possess him, to act as his advocate. I did not want to diminish his “darkness” or his danger, but I wanted to give him all the love and tender sympathy that Dickens’ first person narrative provides his English hero Pip. […] My Henry Phipps is not in any sense the same person as Dickens’ Pip. They have both inherited money from a transported convict, but their actions and their characters are very different.3

The world of Carey’s novel is, indeed, populated by Dickensian characters. Although they do not bear Dickensian names, they nevertheless remind the reader forcefully of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (Silas Smith), for example, or, in the case of the former grocer Mr Buckle reading Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, of Mr Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Like Dickens the Victorian, Carey writes a ‘sensationalist’ novel: his protagonist Maggs is an illegally returned convict who, upon discovery, is threatened with the death penalty. He breaks into Oates’s and Phipps’s house; he kills the treacherous Thief-taker. Oates’s father was sentenced for homicide. Oates is guilty of plagiarism and participation in an abortion which leads to the woman’s death. And he is also responsible for the butler’s death, caused by the contagion diagnosed by Oates in his disguise as a doctor. Maggs very nearly becomes the victim of a conspiracy to murder him; his foster-mother, Ma Britten, earns her livelihood by administering abortions and receiving stolen goods. Nearly everyone in the novel practises some sort of treachery.

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The letters that Phipps writes to his benefactor are full of lies; the portrait he sends him does not depict him, but George IV. Oates promises wrongly to bring Maggs to the Thief-taker. He writes false reports about Maggs’s hypnotic sessions; Oates and his sister-in-law Lizzie deceive Oates’s wife Mary, who in turn conceals her true intentions from Lizzie.

Carey’s novel, however, is not an imitation of a Victorian novel. It should be understood as a ‘rewrite’ or counter-statement (Kontrafaktur), as “a twentieth-century, post-colonial Dickens novel,” since Carey introduces topics that were considered taboo in the Victorian period. Among these are Oates’s adulterous love for Lizzie, abortion, child prostitution as suffered by the maid Mercy, and homosexual relations, as in the case of the two footmen, where the one’s unfaithfulness provides the motive for the other’s suicide.

Fictional Biography?

Central to the novel is Maggs’s relation to the novelist Tobias Oates, an alter ego of Charles Dickens. Oates’s life mirrors that of the Victorian author in many details, eg, in his vulgar preference for colourful waistcoats, in his family situation – his first son is just three months old – and in his love for his sister-in-law, who, like Dickens’s sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, dies on 7 May 1837. Like Dickens, Oates loves acting, enjoys popular success with his first novel, has constant financial worries, and writes character sketches for newspapers like the Morning Chronicle to earn money. Both own portraits of themselves painted by Maclise, though Carey does not borrow the date of the ‘real’ Maclise. Carey gives Oates’s address as 44 Lamb’s Conduit Street, whereas Dickens at the time lived at 48 Doughty Street; both share, however, a previous address, Furnival’s Inn. Like his alter ego, Oates also practises mesmerism, which Dickens became acquainted with via Dr John Elliotson (Carey mentions a Dr Eliotson [sic], 242, 252). He has witnessed Elliotson’s demonstrations of the “mighty curative powers of animal magnetism,” probably for the first time in January 1838. Elliotson later became a good friend and the family doctor. Like Elliotson, Dickens believed in

the existence of an external invisible fluid of pervasive magnetic force suffusing the universe. […] the magnetic force was also an internal power,

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existing within the human body and transmitted from mesmeric operator to subject by force of will. Magnetism was like human energy.\(^7\)

Carey makes Oates practise “animal magnetism” as early as 1837. He probably pre-dates events from Dickens’s life in order to concentrate his plot in 1837, the year of Victoria’s accession. He also attributes to Oates Elliotson’s convictions about phrenology, whereby “criminal tendencies could be physiologically located in the brain” (62). Dickens learned to practise hypnosis in 1842 and was able to mesmerize his wife or friends successfully. In 1844/45 Dickens was intensively occupied with mesmerism and its methods, when he tried to cure Madame de la Rue of her “nervous tic” (76). During her mesmeric trances, which Dickens induced, “the patient explored fears, fantasies, and dreams through verbalized free association” (77), brought on in order to find the hidden causes of her illness. Maggs’s relation to Oates can be described as that of a patient towards his doctor. Thus Oates offers to heal Maggs of his “Tic douloureux” (29) via mesmerism; and like Oates in his sessions with Maggs, Dickens speaks of Madame de la Rue’s hypnosis in terms of a “Phantom,” a “bad spirit”\(^8\) that has to be conquered.

During this phase of intensive application of mesmerism, Dickens wonders whether the ability to induce mesmeric trances is a power of the human spirit, “a mental or imaginative force of the human mind.” He suggests “that mesmerism was like poetry, an example of the inventive powers of the imagination” (90) – a power, therefore, which is the particular and natural gift of the imaginative writer. Oates’s treatment of Maggs, breaking into the latter’s “brain box” (233), and his attempt to become “the first cartographer” of the “Criminal Mind” (90), are, however, not selfless. Through the mesmeric trances, he tries to compensate for his deficient imagination and to collect material for his novels. These are all examples of the way in which Carey’s novel, by re-creating the Victorian author in the figure of Oates, merges with the genre of biography (or fictional biography) in setting out to reshape an historical world.

**Historical Novel?**

The evocation of historical London and the analogous depiction of the two authors Tobias Oates and Charles Dickens allow one to regard *Jack Maggs* as an historical novel. It presents a true picture of the manners of the time, including clothing, the hair-style of footmen, the hierarchy of servants in a


\(^8\) Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism*, 81.
household, the procedures of service at table, hallmarked silver, and – not least – stinking London lodging houses.

Many passages in the novel speak of early-Victorian London and are at the same time reminiscent of passages we can find in Dickens’s novels of social life in Victorian times. Thus, the description of Oliver Twist walking with Bill Sikes through London’s labyrinth of streets, where every step of their progression can be followed on a London city map, may serve as an example of how precisely Dickens evokes his London:

As they approached the City, the noise and traffic gradually increased; when they threaded the streets between Shoreditch and Smithfield, it had swelled into a roar of sound and bustle. [...] 

Turning down Sun Street and Crown Street, and crossing Finsbury Square, Mr Sikes struck, by way of Chiswell Street, into Barbican: thence into Long Lane, and so into Smithfield; from which latter place arose a tumult of discordant sounds that filled Oliver Twist with amazement. [...] 

They held their course at this rate, until they had passed Hyde Park corner, and were on their way to Kensington.9

The passage may have served as a foil for Carey’s picture of London. When Maggs, on his arrival in London, sets out on his walk to Phipps’s house, his steps are described in precise and realistic detail:

he started along the Strand, then seemed to change his mind, for a moment later he was heading up Agar Street, then cutting up to Maiden Lane. 

In Floral Street, he paused before the now illuminated window of McClusky’s Pudding Shop. [...] What he began in Floral Street he finished back on St Martin’s Lane. Here, just a little south of Seven Dials, the stranger stood on a quiet dark corner, alone, free from the blaze of gas.

It was Cecil Street he had come to, a very short street linking Cross Street to St Martin’s Lane. (3)

With similar precision, Carey allows the reader to follow Maggs’s steps when he secretly tracks Oates to his home:

they came to coal-dark Carey Street. [...] In Chancery Lane a great lurching galoot of a link boy came rushing up the pavement holding his blazing faggot high into the night. [...] Jack Maggs stepped back into the doorway of the Great High Court [...]. A moment later Jack Maggs was out in the street again, making himself one of the party with the puffing link boy, boldly sharing the smoky light as far as Theobald’s Road. (39)

Carey Street is not, as one might think, a self-reflexive hint at the author, but can really be found on a London map; though a self-reflexive reference might be the fact that Oates on his way sings “Sally in Our Alley,” a text by the eighteenth-century poet Henry Carey.

A final point here is that, with so many scenes and descriptions recalling the low-life of London – the life of criminals or those on the verge of criminality – James Bradley may be right in calling *Jack Maggs* the re-creation of “the Dickensian world of early Victorian London from a distinctly antipodean perspective.”

Metafictional Novel?

During his nights, Maggs composes the written record of his life in the form of letters to his adoptive son Phipps. This is the heritage he intends to present to Phipps, a story he wants to publish – and to conceal at the same time, since the manuscript is written with invisible ink and in mirror-writing. In addition, Phipps is urged to burn the papers after reading. While Maggs is recording the history of his youth, up to his being sentenced to transportation to Australia, Oates is planning his novel on “the Criminal Mind.” Carey notes in detail how Oates obtains the material for his novel: he works from life. Via mesmerism, he succeeds in eliciting Maggs’s secret, his life story, in order to use it in his novel entitled *The Death of Maggs*. In doing so, he distorts Maggs’s character and changes the facts of his story. In his book, Maggs becomes “a symbol of demonic energy, of colonial wickedness and perfidy.” The creative literary process is theft, plagiarism, “a necrophilic art, like grave-robbing.”

The convicted thief is the author of his story, but the author Oates becomes a thief in order to write. Oates appropriates Maggs’s story, buying narratives and assimilating whatever he observes in his environment. Even Oates’s cook has understood the poetological principle adhered to by her master: “‘He’s looking at you [Maggs] like a blessed butterfly he has to pin down on his board’” (42).

For Oates, Maggs’s disclosures during his mesmeric trances are as real as scenes he can observe on London’s streets, scenes on which he has based his “character sketches”: “here is a world as rich as London itself. What a puzzle of life exists in the dark little lane-ways of this wretch’s soul, what stolen gold

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13 See Koval, “The Unexamined Life,” 671.
lies hidden in the vaults beneath his filthy streets” (90). Not only does Maggs provide him with material for his novel, but, commissioned by the *Morning Chronicle* to report on a disastrous fire in Bristol, he visits the mortuary to inform himself of its consequences. The charred body of a young man inspires him with an idea of how his novel will end:

> God save him, *this* was how *Jack Maggs* would end.
> [...] this horrifying vision: *Jack Maggs* trapped inside his burning house, a whirl of fire blazing all about him.
> [...] He turned away and watched the disturbed beetles and spiders running away across the burning floor. He had glimpsed the ending of his book. (133–34)

The protagonist of Oates’s novel will come down to posterity as Oates in his imagination sees him in the fire: “*Jack Maggs*, the murderer [...] *Jack Maggs* flowering, threatening, poisoning. [...] *Jack Maggs* began to take the form the world would later know. This *Jack Maggs* was, of course, a fiction” (326).

Both Maggs and Oates draw images of themselves formed on literary models. During his worst experience, while he is being whipped, Maggs devises for himself the sort of identity with which English literature is filled:

> his mind crawled forward, always, constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of the Thames, nor Mary Britten’s meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house in Kensington whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by tumbling down a chimney, like a babe falling from the outer darkness into light. Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England, and of Englishmen.

> Now, all these long years later, *Jack Maggs* had become such an Englishman. (322)

Tobias Oates is one of those who produce such images. In his essays for the *Morning Chronicle* or the *Observer*, he constructs London and invents himself at the same time:

> [He] ‘made’ the City of London. [...] he named it, mapped it, widened its great streets, narrowed its dingy lanes, framed its scenes with the melancholy windows of his childhood. In this way, he invented a respectable life for himself: a wife, a babe, a household. (182)

The reader is able to witness how Oates’s novel comes into being:
He was developing, with every passing hour, giddy ambitions for this novel. (178)

It was beneath his feet that the venomous creatures of Jack Maggs’s memories lived. Here Tom dragged his bloody scraps up those grey glistening steps which still existed in the subterranean passages of that Criminal Mind. Seeing these visions, he also glimpsed the greatness of his book. (198)

In the restless, ever-changing landscape of his mind’s eye, he saw the circumstances whereby they might have found their way to him. As always, he believed in the scenes made by his imagination, thought them as real as anything in Great Queen Street. (206)

*Jack Maggs* is a novel about the genesis of a novel, of which the reader is provided with samples: for example, the – deleted – version of its first chapter, its very first sentence, as well as notes for the whole novel, *The Death of Maggs* – although Maggs destroys these manuscripts by water and fire. But like the letters with Maggs’s story addressed to his son, which do not arrive at their destination, these texts form part of the book we are reading.

Carey combines seemingly realistic texts to form a metafictional puzzle – first, the chronological and precisely dated narrative of the events in London from 15 April 1837 to the day of the assassination attempt on Maggs (7 May); second, Maggs’s story of his apprenticeship as a thief; and, third, extracts from the *The Death of Maggs*. For the novel we are reading is not the one Oates has written. The final chapter continues the metafictional enfolding of Oates’s, Carey’s and Dickens’s texts – hence the struggle for power between the real and fictional authors – when we read that Maggs’s widow received several copies of the novel *The Death of Maggs*, which she then handed over to the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Even the date of the novel’s publication and the details of its publication history – first in serial form, then the parts “gathered in a handsome volume, then again when the author amended it in 1861” (328) – mirror details of the genesis of *Great Expectations*. The novel *The Death of Maggs*, ‘written’ by Oates, becomes part of the nation’s literary archives and will be kept there for futurity, while the description of life lived by Maggs, his ‘true’ life as respected citizen, beloved husband and good father preserved in Carey’s novel, has still to be archived.

Although Hermione Lee considers Carey’s novel to be “creative, subversive pastiche,” 14 this may be true only of the passages ‘written’ by Oates, eg, the first sentences of the destroyed first chapter of his *The Death of Maggs*, which is reminiscent of the beginning of *Bleak House*:

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It was a dismal January day in the year of 1818, and the yellow fog which had lain low all morning lifted a moment in the afternoon and then, as if the desolate pile of rock and stone thereby revealed was far too melancholy a sight to be endured, it descended again like a shroud around the walls of Newgate Prison. (274)

The combination of texts allegedly written by Maggs and by Oates, along with chapters which present the same event from different perspectives, makes *Jack Maggs* a novel idiosyncratically typical of Carey.

According to the criteria for historiographic metafiction – “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction)” working “within conventions in order to subvert them”¹⁵ and “being self-conscious about its literary heritage [...] but yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page”¹⁶ – *Jack Maggs* may be seen as an example of what Hutcheon considers the prototype of postmodernist fiction.

*Jack Maggs: A ‘True’ Aussie Story*

If Dickens’s *Great Expectations* is “primarily a novel about self-delusion,”¹⁷ about Pip’s vain attempts to become a gentleman, then Carey retains the topic, but relates it mainly to Maggs. The novel shows how Maggs comes to define his identity in a new way. On his arrival, Maggs understands himself as an Englishman who tries to do the impossible: namely, to return to London, “my home” (5), where – as a returned convict, even after his conditional pardon (128) – he still has to fear death by hanging. Former convicts like Magwitch “could succeed, but they could hardly, in the real sense, return. They could expiate their crimes in a technical, legal sense, but what they suffered there warped them into permanent outsiders.”¹⁸

The forces of Maggs’s environment try to place him socially and to assign him roles: thus the servant-girl Mercy takes him for a footman, while the cook speculates: “‘He looks like a murderer’” (15). He himself, however, warns against any attempt to define either his social or his vocational status: “‘You do not have the devil’s notion who you’re dealing with’” (23). Maggs is an enigmatic character. Though reared as a foundling by his foster-mother, Ma

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Britten (Mother Britain), and destined for a criminal career, duly sentenced as a thief for transportation to Australia and condemned to serve his years as a convict, he can nevertheless quote Shakespeare (43, 227), correct Mercy’s cockney pronunciation (110) and display familiarity with the works of Adam Smith (214). His letters to Phipps draw an impressive picture of lower life in London and of his youthful love for his fellow thief Sophina. While he understands himself as “an old dog […] who has been treated bad, and has learned all sort of tricks he wishes he never had to know” (72–73), as soon as people in his environment know he is “‘a bolter from New South Wales’” they see him as “‘a scoundrel’” (87), “‘a vermin’” (127), “‘a cockroach’” (128) – and finally as “the criminal” (181, 182, 183, 228). With the eradication of his name and its replacement with the term “criminal” or “convict” (91, 202, 305, 307), Maggs becomes the representative of transported convicts, the victims of a cruel system of justice.

During his stay in London, Maggs’s criminal actions consist in entering places where he does not belong. He returns to England knowing he can be sentenced to death by hanging, and secretly enters Oates’s house, but he does not steal. Even breaking into his own house, which he has put at the disposal of Phipps, does not harm its – absent – resident. He accepts the role of footman and works as counterfeit servant for the counterfeit gentleman Buckle (79). Only when he kills the Thief-taker in self-defence does he become formally guilty.

While Maggs’s environment understands him as “the convict,” as a criminal they have to fear, as the prototypical “Criminal Mind” of Oates’s study, it is, for Carey, the environment itself that becomes criminal. Deception and treachery are the order of the day. Oates himself shows his true colours by stealing Maggs’s secrets; Oates and Maggs seem to have exchanged identities: Oates is “about as trustworthy as a Newgate Bird” (30), who burgles and plunders Maggs’s brain-box. He can boast no moral superiority to Maggs. Oates pretend to Maggs that he can track down the Thief-taker and concludes a contract he cannot keep. Disguised as a doctor, he puts Buckle’s house under quarantine, shutting it off from the outside world. He is implicated in Lizzie’s death. Buckle turns criminal by inciting Phipps to murder Maggs. Phipps is morally despicable, because he accepts money from his benefactor but avoids meeting him, and finally even plots to murder him.

Maggs does not accept the role allocations which either Oates, Mr Buckle or the other servants use to categorize him. He has come home, and identifies with England:

“I am a fucking Englishman, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong.” (128)
“I am not of that race.” [...] “The Australian race” [...] “I am an Englishman.”

(312–13)

The London he returns to after a twenty-five-year stay in Australia is a dark and dirty place where all possible variants of criminality flourish, among them theft, rape, child prostitution and abortion. England, London, and Buckle’s house, where Maggs is employed as a “footman” and which is under so-called quarantine, are prisons. Even Maggs’s own head, with its locked-in secrets, is a place broken into, forced open. The years in Australia have changed Maggs so much that he can no longer live in England; he comes to understand Australia as a sanctuary where he can survive peacefully: “Jack himself is finally transformed from an Englishman into an Australian, opting for the more open, generous and egalitarian Australian culture he has come to recognise.”¹⁹ The encounter with Phipps, which he so much desired, enables him to rid himself of his dream of the Victorian gentleman – a dream in which he wanted to see himself as in a mirror. Maggs never catches a glimpse of the gentleman he has made: his memory is of a four-year-old orphan boy, and the miniature portrait he receives from Phipps does not show his adoptive son, but “George IV dressed as a commoner. [...] a copy of Richard Cosway’s portrait” (262). When Phipps comes to kill him, Maggs perceives in the glow of the chimney fire a “spectral figure” (323) – the Phantom who has tormented him for so long – advancing towards him. The figure wears the uniform of a soldier of the 57th regiment, the same uniform as the soldier who applied the 100 lashes to Maggs’s back at Morton Bay, but now worn by his “son,” Phipps. By becoming the King’s soldier in this regiment, Phipps represents in every detail the institution that banished Maggs and denied him an existence in England. Dickens’s Pip is finally reconciled to Magwitch, whom he now sees as

hunted, apprehended, and fatally ill – as his surrogate father, not as someone to be denied or rejected, though Magwitch is in fact unacceptable, being from Australia, a penal colony designed for the rehabilitation but not the repatriation of transported English criminals.²⁰

Carey’s Phipps, on the other hand, continues to reject Maggs; he even points the pistol at him in order to kill him.

Maggs frees himself from the prison he has inflicted on himself, “the prison of his illusions,”²¹ the dream of an idyllic England and its delusive English ‘gentleman’. While, in Oates’s novel, Maggs dies in a fire in London, in

Carey’s novel he is saved from his adoptive son’s attempted parricide and dies many years later in Australia, surrounded by the members of his numerous family. The last chapter of the novel provides a brief summary of the Maggs family’s further years and of their financial and social success, which sounds almost like a repetition of the success-story of the Micawber family in David Copperfield. The Maggs family is “of ‘That Race’” (327); thus “the ending is determinedly Australian and optimistic.”

Carey has commented in an interview on the sketchy description of Maggs’s prosperous Australian years: “My novels tend to end at a speed that is a little breathless.” Though in 1993 Carey deemed it impossible for him to write a happy ending to any of his novels – “I seem incapable of ever creating a happy ending, or imagining the successful outcome of anything” – in Jack Maggs he does so, constructing a one-page ending in which he condenses Maggs’s further life as a personal, financial and social success-story.

Carey’s novel takes place in metropolitan London, with only a few pages situated in Australia. Maggs himself, in his letters to Phipps, does not speak of Australia. But Maggs’s history of his years in Australia are written on his body: Buckle and Oates read on his scarred flesh the evidence of his whipping, “a page of his history” (88): “the sea of pain etched upon the footman’s back, a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin” (86). Not even in the mesmerism sessions does Oates or the reader gather any substantial information about Australia. Only in his dream – rather, nightmare – does Maggs re-live the scene of his punishment as ordered by Captain Logan (112). At the very end of the novel, in Chapter 89 (out of ninety-one), the authorial narrator reports on the flogging scene in just one page. When Mercy questions Maggs about Australia, he withholds all description: “A girl like you cannot imagine what it was, to live in such darkness. […] We were beyond the King’s sight. Not even God Himself could see into that pit” (317–18). Finally, it is Mercy who names the person ultimately responsible for the traumatic whipping Maggs suffered. It may have taken place in Australia but it was inflicted by his home country: “it were the King who lashed you” (318). Similarly, it was Ma Britten who was accountable for Maggs’s training as a thief and con-

22 Hassall, “A Tale of Two Countries,” 129.
25 Even here Carey uses historical models: a Captain Patrick Logan served in 1825–30 in Australia in the 57th Foot Regiment and was feared for the severe punishment he meted out (29 August 2003 <http://www.macgregodd.qld.edu.au/Webchallenge/mbb/logan.htm>).
sequently for his conviction and transportation, while Maggs in his letter to Phipps hints that he might have had a different career if only “I could have had Mary Britten love me, and call me Son. [...] She could fill a space. She could stand her ground. She was the Queen of England in that little whitewashed room” (92–93). When King and Queen, and with them the political institutions as well as the society of England, disown Maggs, there is no other choice for him but to identify with the country that received him: Australia. Maggs’s fortunate return to Australia and his continuing luck in the new town of Wingham, “away from the bad influence of Sydney” (327), permit one to read *Jack Maggs* as “an Antipodean revenge on one of Albion’s glories.”

The happy ending becomes possible through Maggs’s relationship with Mercy Larkin. Mercy is indeed rightly named; she brings mercy into his life and into the harsh reality of Australian small-town life. She reminds him of his two children left behind in Australia, whose education she later takes in hand. And this behaviour towards those who are in need of love and protection plays an important role in the novel. While Maggs suffered from Ma Britten’s lack of love, from being only reared “for a base purpose” (106), Mercy feels for the children who are unknown to her and urges Maggs to accept his responsibility. At the same time, Mercy’s decision to follow Maggs to Australia constitutes a rejection of a different plot. Mr Buckle has read to her from Richardson’s *Pamela* about the marriage of servant girl and master, a story which she long considered to be her own fate: “it was as clear as day to her that she, like Pamela, might one day be mistress of the house wherein she had been called to serve” (151). Mercy, however, chooses an Australian career.

For Carey, *Great Expectations* is an “Aussie story”:

> it is such an Aussie story that this person who has been brutalized by the British ruling class should then wish to have as his son an English gentleman, and that no matter what pains he has, what torture he has suffered, that would be what he would want. I think that that’s a very Aussie thing. I hope it’s of the Australia of the past, not the Australia of the future.

By moving the convict Maggs into the centre of his novel – and thus positioning his version of the story against both Dickens and Oates – he writes “an originary Australian narrative.” If *Great Expectations* presents the colonizer’s perspective, in *Jack Maggs* Carey writes vociferously back: “Carey

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has colonized the fictional space of Dickens’ novel by appropriating his characters and then using them for quite different ends from those Dickens might have envisaged.”

In his “Criticism between Culture and System,” Edward Said refers to Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and his description of a *Hamlet* production in order to demonstrate the theory central to deconstruction – that there is no original text, but only representations of it:

> What Dickens gives us is in fact a double scene or, to use a musical analogy, a theme and variations in which one text or theme and a confused, new version of it take place simultaneously in Dickens’ prose.

What Said says here about Dickens’s use of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can be adapted to describe Carey’s way of treating Dickens in *Jack Maggs*: the intertextual use of the predecessor is understood as

> a criticism, opening the venerated masterpiece to its own vulnerability, letting a monument of literature accept and actually accommodate the fact of its written, and hence unprotected, consequence, which is that each time that it is performed the performance is a substitute for the original, and so on to infinity, with the original becoming a more and more hypothetical “original.”

While Dickens’s *Great Expectations* can be read as “squarely within the metropolitan history of British fiction,” Carey achieves with *Jack Maggs* the perspective of his “ancestor”: Maggs/Magwitch; an authentic Australian version.

## Works Cited


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The Writing-Back Paradigm Revisited

Peter Carey, Jack Maggs, and Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

BARBARA SCHMIDT–HABERKAMP

IN 1989, THREE AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARS published a “little green book” which has since become a much-debated classic in postcolonial criticism: its authors were Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, and their study was called: The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures.¹ What distinguished it from other and earlier publications in the field were the authors’ familiarity with the current theoretical debate and their confident tone, which differed markedly from the defensive attitude that often characterized earlier discussions of English-language literatures outside Great Britain and the USA. Above all, the study reopened a debate that had become stuck within the opposing methodologies of national or regional models on the one hand, and defenders of the unity of English literature on the other.²

Using the term ‘postcolonial’ “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”³ – and, in fact, establishing the term in criticism – Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin drew attention to the linguistic, stylistic and thematic interrelations between postco-

¹ London: Routledge. The study’s catchy title takes up the title of an article by Salman Rushdie which appeared in The Times of London (3 July 1980), and at the same time ironically alludes to the second film in the Star Wars trilogy, The Empire Strikes Back.
³ Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, 2.
olonial texts and those of the former British Empire. They described postcolonial texts as those that reject the authority of imperial discourse through diverse, and frequently overlapping, acts of liberation, such as oppositional use of language. This refers to “the seizing of the means of communication” by the appropriation of the English language and involves the ability to construct and reconstruct the world in accordance with the postcolonial writer’s experience.4 Another such act of liberation concerns historiography, and consists in ‘revisioning’ the view of colonial history offered by the imperial centre.5 And, finally, there is canonical counter-discourse, the “‘rewriting’ of canonical stories,” of the classics of English literature, which aims at destabilizing “the assumption of authority, ‘voice’, and control of the word” on the part of the Empire.6

In short, the study identified literary strategies of subversion and appropriation; it described postcolonial literature as counter-discourse, as subversive literary manoeuvres intended to dismantle the hegemonic discourse of European writing. The concept of counter-discourse as an act of resistance was eagerly embraced by postcolonial critics, such as Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin.7 According to Tiffin, “the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record” were not only “vital and inescapable tasks”; indeed, they were more essentially “characteristic of post-colonial texts” than “the construction or reconstruction of the essentially national or regional.”8 Of the various forms of counter-discourse, canonical counter-discourse or “writing back” has received most attention, its strategy being described by Tiffin as one “in which a post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes.”9 One of the most widely discussed examples of the writing-back paradigm is the Caribbean author Jean Rhys’s novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), a response to Charlotte Bron-

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4 Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, 82.
5 The Empire Writes Back, 91.
6 The Empire Writes Back, 97.
9 “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,” 97.
të’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which Rhys gives a voice to Brontë’s silent – and Caribbean – madwoman in the attic. Other well-known examples include the various responses to Shakespeare’s Prospero and Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, characters who, especially in the eyes of Caribbean writers, represent archetypical colonists.\(^{10}\)

The writing-back paradigm quickly gained ground in postcolonial studies and was discussed widely; it has even acquired the dubious reputation of received wisdom. Its attractiveness lies in the fact that it promises – at last – a kind of systematic and comparative approach which would cover all the new literatures in English – something scholars have been hunting for ever since the new literatures in English were discovered in the 1960s. Moreover, since *The Empire Writes Back* is informed by the current poststructuralist debate and by discourse theory as well as by recent Marxist and feminist thinking, it has succeeded in establishing postcolonial studies as a discipline to be taken seriously, as a provocative intervention, and not as something completely outside the area of current theoretical issues. And, lastly, by including the works of the Western canon in their analyses, practitioners of the writing-back paradigm have indirectly managed to attract the attention of scholars not otherwise interested in the new literatures in English, and thus to give additional importance to their work.

From the start, however, there have been critical voices questioning the validity and usefulness of the writing-back paradigm. The main objection raised is that it defines English-language literatures as products of the binary opposition between colonial (imperial) discourse and postcolonial discourse.\(^{11}\) Since binary oppositions are always hierarchical, there are two consequences: first, postcolonial literatures are relegated to the status of a mere reaction to imperial textuality, and become a kind of second-class creativity that derives its impetus from the Western canon.\(^{12}\) In this way, the metropolitan centre

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11 This objection, already raised in Riemenschneider’s review (*Research in African Literatures* 22.3 [1991]: 206), has been brought up in all discussions of *The Empire Writes Back*.

12 The same criticism has been rightly levelled at Horst Prießnitz’s “‘dual perspective’ model of ‘anglo-colonial’ literature, an applied version of intertextuality based on the ‘colonial status’ of particular literatures on the one hand, and the ‘shared values’ embedded in the English language on the other. Like the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, Prießnitz analyses the ways in which “indigenous colonial cultures” “have reacted” “to the original British cultural text”; Prießnitz, “The Dual Perspective of ‘Anglo-Colonial’ Literatures and the Future of English Studies: A Modest Proposal,” in *Literature(s) in English: New Perspectives*, ed. Wolfgang Zach (Frankfurt am Main:
designates itself once again as the privileged addressee of the postcolonial text. And secondly, the original or imperial texts are depicted stereotypically as an entirely negative, hegemonic phenomenon rather than as a perhaps beneficial source of imitative or adaptive processes. This objection has led Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, in their study Decolonizing Fictions (1993) – a supplement to The Empire Writes Back – to assert that, in the cross-cultural perspective they adopted, they do not privilege “any single one centre as the norm establishing permanent value.” Yet the notion of imperial textuality continues to be central to the intertextual dimensions of postcolonial texts; thus, as before, Brydon and Tiffin describe Australian and Caribbean literatures as characterized by “a counter-discursive stance towards imperial textuality.” In these terms, all imperial texts continue to be seen as repressive; on the other side of the binary, all postcolonial texts, it is assumed, are invested with radically subversive energies.

This brief introduction to the writing-back paradigm forms the background to my discussion of Peter Carey’s novel Jack Maggs (1997), which one reviewer described as “an Antipodean revenge on one of Albion’s literary glories.” A revision of Charles Dickens’s novel Great Expectations, one of the centrepieces of the Western canon, it seems to be a pure and perfect example of the writing-back paradigm. While providing a survey of the main aspects of revision involved in Jack Maggs, I will focus on two further aspects of the novel that question its exemplary status, or, rather, address the limitations of the writing-back paradigm: first, by writing down the story of the origins of Dickens’s novel and thus – on the level of narrative – according temporal primacy to Jack Maggs, Carey inverts one of the main assumptions of the writing-back paradigm – that of original imperial text and postcolonial answer. In employing this narrative strategy, as well as in giving a voice to


15 Brydon & Tiffin, Decolonizing Fictions, 53.
the colonial Other, Carey closely follows *Wide Sargasso Sea*, so that Rhys’s novel is as much a model for *Jack Maggs* as is Dickens’s. And secondly, *Jack Maggs*, by virtue of a number of its motifs, is firmly anchored in the Australian literary tradition, with the result that the intertextual dimensions are extended beyond the imperial–postcolonial connection.

Two of Carey’s earlier novels, *Illywhacker* (1985) and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), were already revisionist representations of Australian colonial history, written back to imperial history. For example, in *Oscar and Lucinda*, the revisioning of imperial history as a continuous process of civilization, illustrated by the Reverend Oscar Hopkins’s move from England to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, is achieved through a fragmentation of the narrative into 110 brief chapters, thus calling into question both the linearity and the causality of events – in fact, replacing them with moments of pure chance, significantly, the main characters are obsessive gamblers. Another strategy is that of permeating the account of history with the voices of those silenced or unaccounted-for; thus, in *Illywhacker*, Carey’s narrator depicts his protagonists as wandering on the edges of history, “up and down the curlicues of the frame of a great painting.” In this way, the novel decentralizes history and shows that there is just as much history occurring around the frame as is depicted in the painting. Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) is more ambivalent, though the very title of the novel suggests a revisionist perspective. On the one hand, the novel tells the rather conventional story of a good boy who had gone to the bad, of a victim of the system. On the other, Ned Kelly’s personal narrative is framed by and contrasts with two official documents, one of which depicts him as a “wild beast,” and the other as the manly, unsentimental “national type,” who calmly goes to his execution remarking “in low tone, ‘Such is Life.’” What these examples demonstrate is that counter-discursive narrative strategies are at the heart of Peter Carey’s more recent novels, all of which focus on some aspect of Australian history.

18 See Ansgar Nünning, “‘The Empire had not been built by choirboys’: Zur revisionistischen Darstellung australischer Kolonialgeschichte in Peter Careys Oscar and Lucinda,” *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 28.3 (1994): 171–87. For an updated English version, see this volume, above.
22 Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, 368. For details about this citation of Joseph Furphy’s novel, see above.
With *Jack Maggs*, written back to Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860–61), Carey undertakes a revision of one of the canonical texts of English literature; indeed, it is a revision of one of the best-known Victorian novels, and Victorian novels, as both the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* and Edward Said in his seminal study *Culture and Imperialism* have shown, were “made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation.”23 In his reading of imperial textuality, Said shows that the nineteenth-century English novel exercised a double function: on the one hand, it helped to justify imperial possessions, and, on the other, it supplied a national/colonial culture with an exalted self-image of its geographical and material provenance. In other words, if Orientalist texts gave legitimacy to European Atlantic power over the Orient – as Said holds in his earlier study *Orientalism* – the Victorian novel gave legitimacy to imperialism as the bedrock of British cultural identity and consolidated imperial authority. In Said’s own words: “Imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible [...] to read one without in some way dealing with the other.”24

*Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs* share the central motif of self-delusion. *Great Expectations* is about its protagonist Pip’s vain attempts to turn himself into a Victorian gentleman with the help of money which, unknown to him, is provided by Abel Magwitch, a convict transported to Australia, whom he had helped early in his life. When Magwitch reappears illegally in London to meet his adopted son, Pip is forced to acknowledge his social reality. The novel ends with the arrest of Magwitch and his death in Newgate Prison, while Pip leaves London to join Herbert Pocket in business in colonial Egypt.

*Great Expectations* is a good and oft-cited example of the ways in which the colonies feature in early and mid-nineteenth-century novels: they generally form no more than a marginal presence, and are mentioned or referred to, but never explored in detail – the aim being to prevent any doubts about the imperial project and, instead, to stabilize the distinction between centre and margin and to keep the Empire in place, as Said explains.25 As Leon Litvack puts it, the colonies are “peripheral, a theatrical ‘green room’ where characters await their cues to appear in the action” and conform to the demands of anglo-centric plots.26 Litvack provides numerous examples from Dickens’s novels in which the significance of Empire and foreign experience for the author and

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23 Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 3.
his characters is apparent in the mention of “voyages, transportations, migrations, and magical appearances and disappearances of goods and capital,” yet the colonies in Dickens’s fiction, he concludes, are treated as peripheral to the main concerns.27

This is also true of Great Expectations in particular, even though in this novel the plot is directed from Australia. Australia does not serve as a setting, but forms the shadowy background against which Magwitch acquires his fortune and decides to spend it on Pip to make up for his own frustrations: if he cannot be a gentleman himself, he will own one.28 Australia is represented through an escaped convict who, with the exception of his initial meeting with Pip in the Kentish marshes, does not appear until well into the second half of the novel. The colonies feature as places where people go in order to make a fortune29 or to escape from social ills; Pip’s emigration at the end of the novel combines these two motifs. Australia in Great Expectations is first and foremost a penal colony; accordingly, Magwitch, except towards the end of the novel, is constantly referred to as “the convict.” Unlike Carey, Dickens does not pay much attention to the grim realities of the penal system, such as the practice of flogging; Magwitch, the reader learns, had been sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay, and then, after he had served his time and been given his liberty, made the fortune he sent his adopted son, the one condition (imposed by law until 1834 and by literary tradition thereafter) being that a return to Britain was out of the question.30

While Great Expectations is much concerned with remorse and forgiveness, with delusion and recognition, Magwitch is the one character who is denied development or even self-definition. Instead, he is consistently represented as the Antipodean Other, who has committed crimes for which the penalty was transportation. Not only is he objectified into “the convict,” he is also dehumanized. Right from his first encounter with Pip, he is presented as a brutal and violent character possessed of animal-like ferocity. Strongly reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë’s presentation of Bertha Mason,31 Magwitch is

28 For Magwitch’s motifs, see Great Expectations (1860–61; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994): 295. All quotations from this edition; subsequent references are in the main text.
29 For examples, see Dickens, Great Expectations, 169, 380.
31 “In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face”; Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre (1847; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975): 295.
described as “a fearful man, all in coarse grey [...] who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled” (6). To deepen this gruesome impression, Magwitch is additionally associated with cannibalism, “the West’s key representation of primitivism,” when he threatens to have Pip’s heart and liver torn out, roasted and eaten (8). Later on, Magwitch is again referred to as “a man of a desperate and fierce character,” as “an ignorant and determined man” who is driven by an idée fixe (313); towards the end of the novel, as Pip tries to hide “his convict,” he realizes that “there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him”: “The more I dressed him, and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes. [...] from head to foot there was Convict in the very grain of the man” (308). The fact that Magwitch dies in Newgate Prison confirms his stereotyped character and existence as a savage criminal.

The tragedy of Magwitch, his obsession, is that while he has become a respectable person in Australia, he continues to look to England and to Pip for spiritual sustenance. “‘When I was over yonder, t’other side the world’,” he tells Pip, “‘I was always a looking to this side’” (399); “‘This way I kep myself a-going’” (295). Throughout the novel, Magwitch is depicted as “an outsider longingly looking in upon a world he can never enter.”33 In this context, Said has argued that

the prohibition placed on Magwitch’s return is not only penal, but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed a ‘return’ to the metropolitan space, which, as all Dickens’s fiction testifies, is meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages.34

Dickens’s representation of the middle-class horror of unexpectedly coming into contact with a returned convict tainted with the brutality and depravity of the convict system both takes up a literary convention of his day and plays on the fears of his fellow countrymen.35 Magwitch’s unlawful presence in London causes unrest for all involved, not least for Dickens, who solves the problem by killing him off. In the end, it is not only Pip’s expectations that come to nothing; Magwitch’s fortune, with which he had wanted to turn Pip into a gentleman, is returned to the imperial power that ordered him to be trans-

34 Said, Culture and Imperialism, xvi (quoted in Litvack).
ported in the first place – thus setting right the untenable and highly ironical situation that an English gentleman should be financed by a criminal who was transported for the term of his natural life. Thus Dickens destabilizes imperial discourse without voicing fundamental criticism of imperial rule.36

Peter Carey’s novel *Jack Maggs* begins at the crucial moment of the convict’s illegal return to England, at the risk of his life, in search of his adopted son. Carey rewrites the story of Magwitch, thus inserting the colonial experience into the imperial narrative, and places him centre-stage as titular hero, allowing him the possibility of achieving selfhood. Pip, who is renamed Henry Phipps, is given only one brief appearance, even if he is the protagonist of Maggs’s imagination. A central role, finally, is given to Dickens himself, who is renamed Tobias Oates. The very renaming of Abel Magwitch as *Jack Maggs* provides a good example of the kind of oppositional use of language described by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*: the richly associative and demonizing name Abel Magwitch, which suggests biblical fratricide, vermin and magic spells – again with the kind of ironical twist typical of Dickens – is turned into two monosyllables, which reflect the laconic taciturnity considered characteristic of the ‘typical’ Australian man at the same time as they virtually make audible the Australian ‘drawl’.37 The strategy of replacing and renaming again resembles that employed by Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who turns Brontë’s Bertha Mason into her protagonist and renames her Antoinette Cosway.

In addition to the similarity in the general outline of the plot, Carey takes up numerous details from Dickens’s novel, changing them slightly, but still stressing the close connection between the two novels: for example, where Dickens includes a performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Carey quotes from *Macbeth*; Estella in *Great Expectations* has to write letters to Miss Havisham reporting on the progress of her education, just as Phipps regularly sends mendacious letters to his guardian about the progress of his social career. Both novels emphasize childhood experience. In *Great Expectations*, we learn

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36 This is not the place to go into detail about Dickens’s criticism of the convict system, as it shines through in many passages of *Great Expectations*. John Thieme has rightly drawn attention to the complexity of postcolonial responses to Dickens, “since he is variously seen as occupying a central role in the canon and as an outsider who could be a trenchant critic of the dominant social codes of his day.” With reference to *Great Expectations*, Thieme argues that “if Magwitch is seen as the representative antipodean character, *Great Expectations* itself already exacts a revenge on the injustice of the English class system”; *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, 102, 108.

37 According to Thieme, the name of Carey’s protagonist “appears to be taken from ‘Magsman’, a colloquial Australian term for confidence trickster that first appeared in the early nineteenth century”; *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, 111.
about the unhappy childhood of all the main characters; indeed, the first part of the novel is narrated from the perspective of Pip the child. *Jack Maggs* is also given the opportunity to recount his similarly unhappy childhood, and at the end of Carey’s novel Maggs is given a reminder that his own two sons, whom he left back in Australia, have a claim to their father, and he returns to lead a happy family life with them.

Throughout *Jack Maggs*, the atmosphere and nineteenth-century setting of Dickens’s novel are re-created in vivid and richly detailed descriptions of persons and places – while it is unmistakably clear that Carey is interested less in a faithful reproduction than in the fictional techniques with which to create such illusions. Also, like Dickens, Carey successfully maintains an atmosphere of suspense and secrecy. Not surprisingly, the novel has been called a pastiche, a term which has had a rather negative ring to it ever since Fredric Jameson condemned it as “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion.” However, Helen Tiffin – true to the writing-back paradigm – has pointed out that “pastiche and parody are not simply the new games Europeans play, [...] but offer a key to destabilisation and deconstruction of a repressive European archive.” She therefore defends pastiche as a “potential decolonizing strategy which invests (or reinvests) devalued ‘peripheries’ with meaning.”

There is nothing random about Carey’s revision of Dickens’s novel; rather, it is the kind of revision which works by appropriating the linguistic, stylistic and thematic features of the model narrative in order to change it in significant ways. These changes in *Jack Maggs* concern, first, the insertion of the colonial experience into the imperial narrative and, secondly, the dissolution of the notion of the original text.

The sympathy in *Jack Maggs* is transferred from English gentleman to Australian convict. *Jack Maggs* is given the same strong physical presence as Magwitch, and he is as determined and liable to act violently and, in fact, kills a man while in Gloucester. Tobias Oates is said to be “almost neurasthenically aware of his force, his heat, his potential for further violence.” However, Carey does not dehumanize him: while Maggs is occasionally objecti-

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fied into “the criminal” (189), “the convict” (155, 160), “the Australian” (180), he is in most cases referred to by his proper name. What is more, his ferocity is turned into a positive quality, into power and strength, which enable him to command other people and even make him attractive to them; thus we can read that a homosexual footman falls for him, and that Mercy Larkin is “intoxicated” by him (278). Like Magwitch, Maggs is given the opportunity to tell the story of his life, but his narrative includes not only his deprived London childhood but also his experiences of the brutalities of the penal system in Australia, which culminate in something close to self-annihilation and in his attempt to “reinvent himself, through the person of Henry Phipps, as a Victorian gentleman.”

In Carey’s novel, he is a very minor actor: he is presented as weak, ungrateful and driven by a “passionate desire to ensure his own comfort” (349), and the only time he actually appears on-stage – in a remarkable scene which is shown from the perspective of different focalizers and forms the turning-point of Carey’s plot – he even attempts to murder his benefactor. Mercy literally comes to Maggs in the character of Mercy Larkin, a woman as scarred by experience as he is himself, who helps him to abandon his illusions and to reconcile him to his Australian identity. They manage to escape and return to New South Wales, where they found a dynasty and lead a respectable family life – significantly, in a new provincial town and removed from “the bad influence of Sydney” (357). Thus, in *Great Expectations* it is Pip who develops, who learns and accepts, in Carey’s novel it is *Jack Maggs*.

The ending of *Jack Maggs* is “determinedly Australian and optimistic” in tone – which comes as a surprise, since Carey’s comparison of England and Australia is, with few exceptions, not foregrounded until the final two pages of the novel. *Jack Maggs* is set as firmly in the imperial centre of London as *Great Expectations*, and the colony is described as hazily in the former novel as in the latter. Australia, in Carey’s novel, is present only “as the convict’s

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42 To my mind, a careful reading of Carey’s novels with a view to the representation of gender is desirable. I suspect that it will yield results that might detract from his fame, since, at least in the example mentioned above, Carey resorts to stereotypical male fantasies of female desires – as, perhaps, an author of tall tales like Carey would do, the tall tale itself being a genre favoured by male writers.


44 Hassall, “A Tale of Two Countries,” 129.
trauma" and is sharply contrasted with the ideal of England and Englishness Maggs constructs for himself during his imprisonment in New South Wales in order to maintain his will to live. The comparison of Australian and English houses, epitomizing not styles of architecture but Maggs’s state of mind and his feelings about home and abroad, illustrates this point:

In the place Jack Maggs had most recently come from, the houses had been, for the most part, built from wood. They strained and groaned in the long hot nights, crying out against their nails, contracting, expanding, tugging at their bindings as if they would pull themselves apart.

Tobias Oates’s house in Lamb’s Conduit Street was built from London brick. It was newly painted, newly furnished. Everything in it glistened and was strong and bright and solid. This was a house that would never scream in the dark, nor did it reek of sap or creosote. Its smells were English smells – polished oak, coal dust, Devon apples. (45)

Unlike Dickens, Carey repeatedly refers to the brutalities of the penal system, thus revisioning the view of colonial history offered by the imperial centre. While Maggs is being flogged “under the scalding sun, which burned his flesh as soon as it was mangled,” he imagines “the long mellow light of English summer” and “the home to which he would one day return” (351). Since he desperately clings to the idea of England as home, the country that expelled him in the first place, he cannot cherish the liberty and respectability Australia offers him as a released convict, but insists on being an Englishman rather than belonging to “that race. [...] The Australian race” (342).

Not only are the Great Expectations he has invested in Phipps thwarted, but also and especially those he entertains towards his mother country. On his arrival in London he is stunned by the contrast between his fantasies of the rich and glossy metropolis of the gentleman ideal and the noisy, smelly, over-populated site of poverty and crime he actually encounters. Nor is he welcomed by those he has come to meet, least of all Phipps. The first person he calls on is his foster-mother, a former midwife and abortionist, who, significantly, is called Ma Britten and who closes the door on him – a clear image of brutal mother England casting out her children. This image of England is taken up again in a later scene in which Percy Buckle grieves at the memory of his sister’s transportation: “‘I never did forget that day, God help us all, that Mother England would do such a thing to one of her own’” (97).

As Anthony J. Hassall has pointed out, Maggs’s gradual disillusionment with what he cherished as home or Mother England links his novel firmly to a sub-genre of Australian writing in the first half of the twentieth century which addresses the relative merits of England and Australia and “chronicles disillusioning returns to the motherland.”

For example, in Henry Handel Richardson’s trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1917–30), which is set in the mid-nineteenth century, the protagonist returns ‘home’ to England, only to find his romantic illusions shattered by the criminal energy, the narrow-mindedness and provinciality he encounters. In the final volume he returns to Australia, and after he has died, the novel closes with the much-quoted sentence: “The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit.”

There is also clearly a link between *Jack Maggs* and the colonial male adventure novel of the late nineteenth century. In Rolf Boldrewood’s novel *Robbery under Arms* (1888), the protagonist Dick Marston, in chains in the condemned cell and awaiting execution for bushranging, relates the story of his adventurous life up to his last-minute reprieve, followed by twelve years in gaol, release, and marriage to his faithful childhood sweetheart, Gracey Storefield. As in *Jack Maggs*, the adventure narrative is framed by domesticity, and Boldrewood’s novel closes with the sententious statement that “in any part of Australia, once a chap shows that he’s given up cross doings and means to go straight for the future, the people of the country will always lend him a helping hand, particularly if he’s married to such a wife as Gracey.”

This pattern of rejection and adoption of literary models is repeated in *Jack Maggs*. In addition to *Great Expectations*, another of “Albion’s literary glories” to be cited and eventually rejected is Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela* (1740), which is read to Mercy by Percy Buckle, in whose household she works as a servant. By becoming Maggs’s wife and returning with him to Australia, she refuses to pursue the career envisaged for her in the English novel, and by implication, this novel, too, is rejected as providing a model of existence for (future) Australians. Instead, Carey has quoted from *Great Expectations* – probably with relish – the phrase “such is life,” which is voiced

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50 John Thieme has drawn attention to the intertextual reference to *Pamela*, in *Postcolonial Con-Texts*, 116–17.
by Joe and Maggs respectively\textsuperscript{51} and which at the same time refers to the title of another classic of Australian literature, Joseph Furphy’s novel \textit{Such is Life} (1903). Containing the fictional diaries of Tom Collins, a former bullocky, the novel in 1897 was offered to \textit{The Bulletin} for serial publication by its author with the description: “Temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian.”\textsuperscript{52}

What these examples show is that it is insufficient to read Carey’s novel as merely writing back to the English tradition. While the very model of \textit{Great Expectations} confirms that English influence is part of the Australian cultural heritage, \textit{Jack Maggs} leaves no doubt that the intertextual relations extend beyond the postcolonial/imperial connection. In rooting his novel firmly in the Australian literary tradition, Carey emphasizes the point that looking towards the mother country is too narrow a prospect and, at the same time, confirms the existence of a native literary canon worthy of being drawn on.

The most interesting strategy in Carey’s novel, however, is that it claims \textit{Great Expectations} as an Australian narrative, thus inverting, if not dissolving, the notion of original text and sequel that is central to the writing-back paradigm. Dickens himself is recast in \textit{Jack Maggs} as the writer Tobias Oates, whom Maggs encounters as an author with a growing reputation and who is intent on turning Maggs into a fictional character in a novel called \textit{The Death of Maggs}. Oates and Dickens not only share a large number of family circumstances;\textsuperscript{53} most importantly, \textit{The Death of Maggs} is published in serial form in 1860, the same year in which \textit{Great Expectations} began to appear in \textit{All the Year Round}. Oates mesmerizes Maggs in order to gain access to his memories and use them as raw material for his novel, attempting to exert his power of description and definition over Maggs as “cartographer” of “the Criminal Mind” (98), in the same way that, as a journalist, he “makes” the City of London by naming and mapping it (200). When Maggs finds out, he refuses to accept the picture drawn of him by Oates (307) and passionately resists his claim to authority over his representation: “‘I won’t have nothing written down’” (54). Eventually he cannot prevent the publication of Oates’s version of his life in \textit{The Death of Maggs}; however, in Carey’s novel this version is contested by two more versions of Maggs’s life, thus drawing attention to the contingency of any such narrative.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53} For details, see Leon Litvack’s review of \textit{Jack Maggs} in the \textit{Dickensian} 94.1 (1998): 58–60.

\textsuperscript{54} For details, see Hassall, “A Tale of Two Countries,” 131.
Maggs never gets to read *The Death of Maggs*; the novel is abandoned by its author after the death of his beloved sister-in-law and is not published until three years after Maggs’s death. What we learn about the novel from the passages quoted is that it lays great stress on the idea of the “beloved motherland” and that it objectifies its protagonist into “the murderer” – Dickensian notions and narrative strategies that Carey’s novel rejects. The first passage quoted depicts the protagonist and other convicts in Australia yearning for “mother England”:

> Many of M—’s companions could not stand the torture of banishment, and went mad on the voyage out. Sinners they may have been, but English sinners in their hearts. Whether plucked from village or the festering heart of the great Wen, they could not bear the prospect of never more seeing their beloved Motherland.

> M— would not go mad, but only because he carried with him the strong conviction that he would, no matter what Judge Denman read to him, walk once more in England’s green and pleasant land. (253)

The only other quotation is that of the first sentence of *The Death of Maggs*:

> “As certain birds do declare themselves unto their intended, so the Murderer returned to court his beloved England, bold as cock robin in his bright red waistcoat” (253). The fact that the red waistcoat is mentioned in the first line of Carey’s novel, too, marks it as a quotation; it implies that Oates draws on Carey’s novel, and further destabilizes the very basis of fictional authority with its linear influence. Indeed, when Oates’s expectations of a happy family life are thwarted after his sister-in-law’s death and his wife turns away from him, he begins to demonize Maggs and “to heap up all his blame upon him” (357). “Jack Maggs,” it says in the novel, “began to take the form the world would later know. This Jack Maggs was, of course, a fiction” (357). This is confirmed on the last page of Carey’s novel, where the reader learns that “the real Jack Maggs” dies “not in the blaze of fire Tobias had always planned for him,” but as a respected citizen of Wingham in New South Wales, in his own bed and surrounded by his weeping sons and daughters (358). Thus, by telling the story of how Maggs came to enter Oates’s novel, *Jack Maggs* upsets the temporal linearity of original text and response, in much the same way that *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems to pre-date *Jane Eyre*, and at the same time it emphasizes the degree to which Victorian Britain depends on her colonies.

In conclusion, while Carey’s *Jack Maggs* is, as a revision of Dickens’s *Great Expectation*, a clear example of the writing-back paradigm, it also questions some of its fundamental assumptions, in particular the notions of the English text authorizing the postcolonial one, and the exclusivity, or even priority, of the textual interrelations between the two. It undercuts the imperial binary both by connecting with the Australian literary tradition and by fore-
grounding in the closing pages the building of a civil society free from the shackles of colonialism. Significantly, *Jack Maggs* does not get to read the final textualized version of his life.\(^{55}\)

Inter textual relations are a matter of choice and not primarily of historical necessity, and thus cannot be satisfactorily analysed with the help of opposing essentialisms like pitting a (post)colonial text against an imperial one.\(^{56}\) Not only is the cultural transfer no longer a one-way matter, as is amply evidenced by, for example, the impact of the novels of Salman Rushdie on contemporary literature. There are also many counter-discursive possibilities and instances even within one postcolonial culture’s encounter with its own master-narratives, as Carey’s two most recent novels, which focus on legendary characters and events from Australian (cultural) history, demonstrate: the Kelly Gang and the Ern Malley Hoax respectively. In addition, opposition to the old imperial power is increasingly replaced by the interchange between independent states and peoples,\(^{57}\) and also by a new sense of the world as criss-crossed by migrants. Studies in the new English literatures and cultures should therefore not be tied too narrowly to a politics of decolonization, as happens when the writing-back paradigm is generalized into an approach to all postcolonial literature. Peter Carey’s novel *Jack Maggs*, while it fits perfectly into the writing-back paradigm, at the same time exposes its weaknesses.

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\(^{55}\) In his more recent publications, Bill Ashcroft has therefore emphasized the transformative power of counter-discourse, arguing that it is precisely this “refusal to be drawn into the imperial binary which acts as the most effective form of transformative energy in these texts”; “Resistance and Transformation,” *English Literatures in International Contexts*, ed. Heinz Antor & Klaus Stierstorfer (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2000): 27. See also his study *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

\(^{56}\) Edward Said himself has, in all discussions of his major studies, been criticized for arguing on the basis of binary oppositions.

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Perseus wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. We draw the magic cap down over our own eyes and ears so as to deny that there are any monsters.¹

I suppose I’ve always been interested in monsters, and the monsters within us.²

THROUGHOUT HIS FICTION, Peter Carey has been concerned with unsettling the illusions of capitalism. Critiques of contemporary capitalist society figured significantly in his earlier works. Among the stories, “American Dreams” exposed the illusions of consumerism, offering a sarcastic view of tourism as commodification; in “War Crimes,” capitalism entered “its most picturesque phase”³ with two hippy-punk capitalists acting as literal troubleshooters for an ailing business, while “The Puzzling Nature of Blue” investigated the relationship between capitalism and colonialism. Carey’s first novel, Bliss, tackled the advertising industry, proposing a metaphoric view of capitalism as cancerous. Illywhacker displayed the evolution of Australian society as “a kind of degeneration from entrepreneurial cap-

¹ Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1, tr. Ben Fowkes (Das Kapital, 1867; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976): 91. All further references are to this edition.
² Joanna Penglase (co-writer) & Don Featherstone (co-writer and director), The Most Beautiful Lies: A Film About Peter Carey (BBC 1, Omnibus, 1986–87).
italism” to “the pet shop people.”4 The Tax Inspector delivered Carey’s most savage indictment of contemporary capitalism through its portrayal of the Catchprice family, while the fantasy world of The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith was an exposé of American capitalism’s cultural imperialism. But in Jack Maggs, Carey goes to the heart of the contradictions of industrial capitalism in nineteenth-century England – the accumulation of wealth through expropriation, the perpetuation of power through what Christopher Caudwell called “phantastic illusion,”5 the relationship with colonialism and the paradoxical retaliation of the colonies – and he does so in terms that are analogous to the vivid imagery of Karl Marx’s classic, Capital.

As Francis Wheen has pointed out,6 Marx used the language of trickery, appearances, mystery and illusion to delineate the brutalities of an economic system that adopts a mask of civility while it accumulates wealth through nothing less than “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder” and “systematic theft.”7 This paradox, according to Marx, was hidden by the “phantom-like objectivity”8 of the capitalist relation, one of a number of deceptions which “rests in part on pure illusion.”9 Marx stressed the capacity for capitalism to create unreal appearances, the bourgeois chimera of fairness in social relationships in the market-place, to hide the brutal realities of wage slavery and the cash nexus, and he took savage delight in exposing the false impressions fostered by “peaceful commerce.”10 Among these were the transformation of common theft into acceptable business, the deception that there was a regulatory order to the madness of the free market, and the “Great Money Trick,” to use Robert Tressell’s formula,11 that the worker received a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, by virtue of which the true value of a worker’s labour was hidden and undervalued to produce the surplus value profit of the commodity-exchange system. The “Holy Ghost” of capitalism was the public debt: “As with the stroke of an enchanter’s wand, it endows unproductive money with the power of creation and thus turns it into capital.”12 Such illusions were

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7 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 874, 886.
8 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 128.
9 Marx, in Wheen, Karl Marx, 306.
10 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 916.
12 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 919.
fostered by “the mystery of money,” its capacity to mask the raw facts of exploitation and expropriation behind a veil of apparent social order. But once the “veil is [...] removed from the countenance of the social life-process,” then “the illusions of the Monetary System” became apparent: “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes.”

However, the mesmeric spells of capitalism could not be sustained entirely without unsettling contradictions, and one arena in which they became exposed for Marx was in the colonies: “the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.” European capitalism was partly enabled by the “treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder” in the colonies. According to Marx, the colonial system was a crucial factor in fostering industrial capitalism, and bluntly revealed its contradictions. Commenting on the relationship between the wage labourer and the supposedly free market, Marx argued:

> At home, in the mother country, the smug deceitfulness of the political economist can turn this relation of absolute dependence into a free contract between buyer and seller, between equally independent owners of commodities, the owner of the commodity capital on one side, the owner of the commodity labour on the other. But in the colonies this beautiful illusion is torn aside.

As Robert Young puts it, quoting from Marx’s *Surveys from Exile*,

> It was colonialism [...] that revealed the truth of capitalism: “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.

At the same time, Marx saw in the colonies one of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system: it spawned its own cut-throat competition, so that English metropolitan capitalism was challenged by an emergent and independent colonial capitalism. The conditions in the American colonies, for example, allowed those who migrated there as wage-labourers of one form or another to develop their own forms of exploitation and expropriation, which Marx termed “the mystery of money.”

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13 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 139.
15 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 925.
16 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 918.
17 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 935.
another to overthrow their “relations of dependence” and transform themselves into independent producers working for themselves, to become little capitalists: “Horror of horrors! The excellent capitalist has imported bodily from Europe, with his own money, his own competitors! The end of the world has come!”

Marx had little to say about the very different conditions in the colony of Australia except to berate the “shameless squandering of uncultivated colonial land on aristocrats and capitalists by the English government”; and I am not seeking to force a Marxist paradigm onto Carey or his novel. But Marx’s vivid use of the language of magic, necromancy and illusion to expose capitalism’s capacity to hide its contradictions and brutalities allows some interesting analogies to be made with similar elements in *Jack Maggs*.

The novel’s opening image of the inn-sign for the Golden Ox, “a golden bull and an overgrown mouth opening to devour him,” immediately invokes the rapacious, self-consuming world of nineteenth-century business. While capitalism’s own gigantic lootings go generally unpunished, minor thefts of property such as those perpetrated by Maggs and his beloved Sophina are punished by death or colonial transportation. Maggs is the return of capitalism’s repressed colonial ‘Other’. He is England’s orphan, betrayed by Ma Britten into the kind of criminal child labour that Marx documents in *Capital* as part of capital’s “werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour.” The novel plays with the paradox of crime as labour and labour as crime, just as it exposes the relationship between the accumulation of wealth and “systematic theft.” Maggs is impoverished by an unjust social system which drives him into a life of crime and then punishes him for it. Yet he remains mesmerized by the illusions of the social system of capitalism, the victim of what Marx’s English contemporary Thomas Carlyle called “a kind of horrid enchantment” besetting the nation. In particular, he is obsessed by notions of social and national identity, the idea of England, an illusory England of his own making which he forged for himself while suffering floggings in the colony (321–22). He bluntly declares: “‘you see, I am a fucking Englishman, and I have Eng-

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19 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 936.
20 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 940.
22 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 353.
23 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 886.
lish things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong’’ (128). Given his acquisition of property in London, there is a pun here in the word “settle” and in the idea of Maggs as a settler; but the last thing that his return achieves is a sense of belonging, and his actions don’t “settle” anything. All the other characters are severely disrupted by his presence. He invades their lives rather as Oates invades his; and he disappears as quickly as he came, leaving them to pick up the pieces. Maggs’s invasion shatters the veil of bourgeois appearances behind which the characters shelter. All the main characters are pretending to be someone else. Maggs, the ex-convict now transformed into successful colonial gentleman, enters Buckle’s household “in disguise” (9) as a footman and becomes a murderer. Oates, his fictional re-creator, has reinvented himself as a gentleman man-of-letters, but masquerades as a doctor, possibly causing the death of the butler Spinks, and then becomes an accomplice in an actual murder. Buckle, the ex-shopkeeper, like Phipps, the elevated orphan, has appropriated the guise of gentlemen, but is “no more a gentleman” than Maggs himself (9) and can only “counterfeit” the role (79). Mercy, the one-time prostitute, has become a maid, and Buckle’s clandestine mistress; Lizzie, Oates’s sister-in-law, is also his incestuous lover, while his dutiful wife becomes his accomplice in her sister’s manslaughter. They all have secret lives, hidden behind the bourgeois illusions and their own illusions of becoming bourgeois. But the over-riding secret is the illusion of bourgeois society itself, the glowing streets of London that hide beneath their surface “hellish” (291) crimes of appropriation and betrayal.

As well as belonging to an illusory England of the mind, Maggs is also obsessed by the idea of turning himself and Henry Phipps, his adopted “son,” into gentlemen, icons of the very hierarchy of social injustice which led to his imprisonment. His delusions are explored through his relationship with the novelist Tobias Oates. When Oates sees the miniature portrait of “George IV dressed as a commoner,” which Maggs believes to be of Phipps, he realizes that Maggs is the victim of “fraud” (262). But he too perpetrates fraud on Maggs. Their association can be seen as a metaphor of the colonial relationship: paradoxically, Oates controls Maggs while at the same time becoming his manacled victim.

Oates embodies the contradictions of bourgeois identity. He is a self-made man who has “invented a respectable life for himself” (182), but, not unlike Percy Buckle, he lives in fear of being exposed as a charlatan, his sense of his own status being precarious and illusory. Oates’s uncertainties about himself are manifest in his edgy habits, “as if he were constantly confirming his position in the world,” something Maggs himself finds deeply “unsettling” (26). During his dinner with the surgeons, he feels intimidated by their status as
gentlemen and aristocrats trained at Oxford or Cambridge, and by his fear of being thought “low” (135). He therefore forsakes his carefully cultivated mask as the “man of letters” and becomes “a common conjurer, a street magician” (136) in order to win their approval. At the same time, as the representative of the emergent bourgeoisie, he gazes on them “as if he had been appointed to sit in judgement on them” and parodies them to their own faces in his guise as “that preposterous saw-bones Sir Spencer Spence” (135). Like the narrator in “War Crimes,” his rampant self-interest is driven by fear, a fear of being “at the bottom of the shit heap,” as Carey described it.25 Having had “no proper family,” he has developed “a mighty passion to create that safe warm world he had been denied” (36). But, by contrast with the eventual financial success of his fiction, all he succeeds in creating in his personal life is incest, torment and the manslaughter of his sister-in-law. Like all the characters to a greater or lesser extent, his fear of poverty leads him to be obsessed with money – what Buckle calls “convict gold [...] Dirty money” (256). The savage lust for money leads Phipps to attempt to murder Maggs in order to defend his fraudulent status of “gentleman” and his inheritance. Paradoxically, like an arch-capitalist whose wealth is based, according to Marx, on the “theft of the labour time of others,” 26 Oates’s labour is a kind of theft. Maggs accuses him of being a “‘damned little thief’” (279). He plunders Maggs’s inner life for his fiction just as he does the city, and describes Maggs’s mind as “a treasure house” which he can “enter, and leave,” at will (87), “a world as rich as London itself” (90). Notably, he sells the copyright for his fictional account of Maggs for sixty pounds before he has even written it (220).

Carey’s novel exposes the trickery and illusions of capitalism partly by revealing the fakery of fiction-making itself. Oates is described as an illusionist with powers of manipulation, mystification, fraud. He is frequently represented as a kind of magician, but he also suffers from a constant sense of insecurity about the illusions he perpetrates. Oates manages the precarious business of maintaining his bourgeois status by effecting fictional illusions and pulling the wool over people’s eyes through stories. Through his art, he has achieved power such that he has become “a sorcerer” who “made the City of London” through his writing (182). He puts Maggs under his mesmeric spell and holds him in “magnetic chains” (202) in order to steal his inner life. He then violates Maggs’s mind with the Phantom, Oates’s invention, “introduced into [Maggs’s] sleep by Magical Arts” (238; also 203) to

keep Maggs subservient through fear, a kind of “colonial mesmerism.” Oates is compassionate and yet at the same time unscrupulous in his appropriation of other people and their lives as the fodder for his fiction. When he visits the survivors of the fire in Brighton, he entertains them with magical tricks (“He was a good magician,” 133), but at the same time he is busy imaginatively transforming the horrific image of the burnt child Thomas Griff into the final scene for his novel about The Death of Maggs. During the quarantine of Buckle’s house, Maggs feels “the power of Tobias Oates to be greater than he had suspected,” a “violent magic” (146) that makes everyone “captive” (147) of his illusions. Maggs describes him to the sick butler Spinks as “a pooka” or dark magician who has put a spell on the household (165).

But the analogy between the trickery of capitalism and of the artifice, fraud, and deceptions of the fiction-maker goes further. Edward Said suggests that Marx discovered “the imaginative role played by money in mid-nineteenth-century Western society.” Money in capitalist society achieves a creative inventiveness comparable to that practised by the nineteenth-century novelists, Said argues, quoting from Marx’s account in “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society” (1844) of “how money gives fiction its potency” through its comparable capacity to transform imagination into reality, and vice versa:

If I long for a particular dish or want to take the mailcoach because I am not strong enough to go by foot, money fetches me the dish and the mailcoach: that is, it converts my wishes from something in the realm of imagination, translates them from their mediated, imagined or willed existence into their sensuous, actual existence – from imagination to life, from imagined being into real being. In effecting this mediation, money is the truly creative power. [...] Being the external, common medium and faculty for turning image into reality and reality into a mere image [...] money transforms the real essential powers of man and nature into what are merely abstract conceits and therefore imperfections – into tormenting chimeras – just as it transforms real imperfections and chimeras – essential powers which are really impotent, which exist only in the imagination of the individual – into real powers and faculties. [...] It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant.

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27 Alison Winter, Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998): 211. Winter describes the use of mesmerism in colonial India as part of her survey of mesmeric practices in the Victorian age. Notably, 1837, the historical setting for Jack Maggs, was the date at which the scientific interest in mesmerism provoked the increasingly fashionable flirtation with it (42–56). Thanks to Roger Luckhurst for this reference.


What Marx calls “the magic of money”\textsuperscript{30} has the power to fabricate a new reality, to achieve “the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries,”\textsuperscript{31} to allow a transformation of the self and to effect the transmutation of what is only imaginary into reality, as well as making reality itself imaginary. At the same time, money “confounds and exchanges all things, it is the general confounding and compounding of all things – the world upside-down,”\textsuperscript{32} sentiments which coincided with those of Thomas Carlyle: “money, as they say, is miraculous. [...] What miraculous facilities has it yielded, will it yield us; but also what never-imagined confusions, obscurations has it brought in; down almost to total extinction of the moral-sense in large masses of mankind!”\textsuperscript{33}

So, in \textit{Jack Maggs}, the criminal, the adopted orphan and the shopkeeper transform themselves into gentlemen, the prostitute becomes a maid and respected matriarch, the insecure lower-class boy metamorphoses into the successful novelist. Oates himself “always believed in the scenes made by his imagination” (206), but he also makes them his means to succeed. When Buckle discovers that Oates is going to use the mesmeric sessions with Maggs to plunder his mind for fictional material, Buckle earnestly asks: “‘Did you never imagine yourself in his position?’,” to which Oates replies, “‘Buckle, dear Buckle. It is my business to imagine everything’” (88), the word “business” having a double edge to it here; but his obsession with making money out of his imagining means that he sacrifices empathy for his material to the demands of his “business.” The limits of Oates’s power are revealed by Lizzie’s disclosure that she is pregnant, which is “‘Nothing in the least imagined’,” she tells him (195).

The urgent desire to scramble up the social ladder drives the characters, but what fuels Carey’s book is the exposure of this social fluidity as both real and fake. On the first page, Maggs arrives, being “imagined” by his fellow passengers as a book-maker, a gentleman farmer, an upper servant (1), all respectable roles in bourgeois society. But the contradictions of such roles are hinted at in Mrs Halfstairs’s bemused query with regard to Buckle: “‘Who would imagine what the gentleman ever had in his mind?’” (12). Maggs then becomes “transformed” into a footman (25), but the truth, as he tells the charlatan Partridge, is that “‘you can’t imagine who I am’” (252). As a child during his first criminal outing with Silas, he “was imagining [he] was about to go to school” (95), which in a way he was; and the robbery leads him into an

\textsuperscript{30} Marx, \textit{Capital}, vol. 1, 187.  
\textsuperscript{31} Marx, \textit{Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844}, 167.  
\textsuperscript{32} Marx’s \textit{Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844}, 169.  
\textsuperscript{33} Carlyle, \textit{Past and Present}, 175.
“enchantment” with the plush world of the bourgeoisie (99), in which he and Sophina eventually fall asleep “imagining [them]selves safe” (212). Imagining England inspired Maggs to succeed and to return (291; and 321–22). That illusory England, with Oates as its agent, effectively recaptures Maggs until Mercy wakes him from his mesmerized state (318), and he confronts the imaginary Phantom in the form of Phipps (323). Oates still writes his novel, but the role Oates allocates to the ‘real’ Maggs is just “a fiction” (326) which he escapes.

If the languages of illusion and fictionality expose the contradictions of capitalism, Maggs’s escape enacts capitalism’s relationship to its colonies, which, according to Marx, turns from dependence to retaliatory independence. During the haunting episode on the river Severn, Maggs takes over the power and control of the relationship with Oates to the extent of manacling Oates and telling him, “‘You are just a character to me too, Toby’” (280). This completes the metafictional rebellion of character against author begun when Maggs wrote Tobias Oates into his journal (26). At the same time, the true incentive behind Oates’s labour is revealed: “it was the Criminal Mind which now controlled Tobias” (304).

But this doesn’t signal the overthrow of bourgeois illusions, far from it, and Jack Maggs is not to be read as a celebratory endorsement of colonial retaliation. Maggs’s conditional pardon from his sentence initiated another cycle of capitalistic accumulation in the colony through his brick-making business. Maggs re-creates the capitalist order in Australia:

“I am a vermin who made ten thousand pounds from mucky clay. I have a grand house in Sydney town. There is a street named for me, or was when I sailed. I keep a coach, and two footmen. I am Mr Jack Maggs Esquire.” (280–81)

Oates may dominate London in his mind and be able to make money from it in his writing, but it is Maggs who actually owns some of it as property:

“That clay made my fortune, Mr Oates. It gave me a mansion in Sydney. It gave me the dosh to buy the freehold of the house in Great Queen Street. And then, as I said, I provisioned it. I bought the wallpaper, the china, the finest Oriental rugs.” (228)

It is for this reason that the abrupt and unreal ending of the novel is so appropriate. Maggs escapes with Mercy from the fictional embrace of Tobias Oates but into a never-never land of capitalist illusion with its bourgeois and patriarchal family (the Maggs family name), its industry (the Brickworks), its licensed drugs (Maggs’s pub), its civilized pursuits (local government and cricket), its grand buildings and hierarchies of domestic labour (Mercy and
her servants), and its culture (Mercy’s library). While Maggs eventually settles for and in Australia, he leaves England utterly unsettled, and part of that unsettled business comes back to trouble this overtly imaginary ending. In her redemptive role as “a spirit, a force of nature” (324) saving and redeeming *Jack Maggs* for a better life, Mercy is in danger of being a stereotype of a very old-fashioned kind, but arguably the ending allows her to become the representative of a female potential which has received short shrift through the rest of the novel. It is she who is in control of Tobias Oates’s final production, *The Death of Maggs*, and it is she who tears out the dedication to Buckle in each of her seven copies. One of these is signed “Captain E. Constable,” who, as a gay man in nineteenth-century England, is the representative of an equally marginalized group. But Constable’s name at the end of the novel, with the associated suicide of his lover Albert Pope (167), is a reminder of the violence of the neocapitalist society Mercy presides over and a suggestion that beneath this new bourgeois order an equally violent expropriation is at work. As Marx knew, force is “the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.”

At the end of the book, the prison colony of Australia is in the process of forging a new nation, a national identity which was being actively encouraged at the time by an as yet non-imperialist British government keen, as Robert Young reminds us, to encourage white settler colonies “to develop autonomous government and economic and military self-reliance.” The fact that the outcome of ‘criminal’ labour should be a new nation chimes well with Marx’s Swiftian “Digression: On Productive Labour” in *Capital* (vol. 4), in which he unsettles the distinction between private and national crime. He argues that, logically speaking, a criminal is a highly productive member of society, since he produces the crimes that employ a whole range of people, from police and judges to hangmen and torturers, and encourages manifold cultural productions, from the art of lockmaking to banknote design. He ends with the question: “if one leaves the sphere of private crime, would the world market ever have come into being but for national crime? Indeed, would even the nations have arisen?”

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34 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 916
35 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 95.
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ASKED IN A 2002 INTERVIEW about the dismantling of English Departments in some Australian universities and what the interviewer saw as a concomitant devaluing of literary texts in today’s academia, Peter Carey expressed a hope for “some sort of return to the old-fashioned close-reading of texts” as a means of “keeping literature alive.”¹ When a reader or critic follows this suggestion, as I hope to do here, s/he finds—along with mesmerizing plots, fully realized worlds, and characters who can manage to be utterly believable while dematerializing, surviving their own repeated deaths, or concocting mad schemes to build and transport glass churches—a tendency to focus on narrative or the telling of stories. Carey uses narrative, in the forms of the stories he tells, the stories his characters recount, and the stories they often find themselves enacting, for the multiple purposes of plot, characterization, and theme.

This aspect of his work has already been much noted in the growing body of criticism his fiction has inspired. One such school of criticism is perhaps led by Helen Daniel, whose 1988 book Liars already saw Carey as one of a number of Australian fiction writers to stump readers with the Cretan Liar Paradox, which precludes adequate response to an admitted liar’s admission that he is, ‘in fact’ or ‘in truth’, lying.² Critics of this persuasion focus on

Carey’s yarning and patent conning as instances of postmodern play, one of
the many signs of the author’s artistic prestidigitation and contemporaneity.
Like other readers, they find such storytelling pervasive in his fiction. As
Daniel says simply, in another context, “All Carey’s work is about stories,
those we fabricate ourselves and those thrust upon us, dislodging our own.”
Daniel’s observation suggests a second kind of reading of Carey’s interest
in narrative, one that concentrates on the implications of this technique for
character, theme, and ethical vision. An early and exemplary entry in this
category is Anthony Hassall’s essay on Bliss, but the topic continues to be of
interest, as evidenced by Christer Larsson’s more recent book. Finally, a
third critical approach is to mesh the two others, by, for example, finding
Carey’s storytelling to be both postmodern in form and ethically inflected
toward the postcolonial in theme, an approach adopted very fruitfully by Paul
Kane in a 1993 essay.

My intention here is to take a slightly different tack: examining storytelling
and/or the inhabiting of cultural masterplots as sites at which characters (and
finally, inevitably, the author himself) are faced with the challenge of seeking
or escaping authentic selfhood or existential good faith, in the Sartrean sense.
To flee such good faith represents, for Sartre, an act of lying, but one funda-
mentally different from the act of deceiving another, since it obliterates the
duality of deceiver and deceived. One cannot lie to oneself deliberately, be-
cause to do so would be to admit knowledge of the opposing truth. Such a
game of hide-and-seek is hard to keep playing, despite its universality:

Even though the existence of self-deception is very precarious, and though it
belongs to the kind of psychic structures which we might call “metastable,” it

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3 Helen Daniel, “Peter Carey,” in International Literature in English: Essays on the
4 Anthony J. Hassall, “Telling Lies and Stories: Peter Carey’s Bliss,” Modern Fi-
tion Studies 35.4 (1989): 637–53. See also Hassall, Dancing on Hot Macadam: Peter
Carey’s Fiction (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1994).
5 See Christer Larsson, The Relative Merits of Goodness and Originality: The Ethics
of Storytelling in Peter Carey’s Novels (Uppsala: Uppsala UP, 2001), which takes a
speech-act-theory approach to Carey’s fiction. See also Carolyn Bliss, “The Revision-
ary Lover: Misprision of the Past in Peter Carey,” Australian and New Zealand Studies
6 Paul Kane, “Postcolonial/Postmodern: Australian Literature and Peter Carey,”
7 This aspect of Carey’s fiction is also noticed by Bruce Woodcock, particularly in
his discussion of Bliss. See his Peter Carey (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996): 42,
57, 88.
“Lies and Silences”

presents nonetheless an autonomous and durable form. It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people.\(^8\)

Perhaps its normality is in part the result of its appeal to human cowardice. In a 2003 essay celebrating the renewal of interest in Sartre, Scott McLemee explains the conjunction of fear and bad faith thus:

Human consciousness, according to Sartre’s “phenomenological ontology,” finds itself thrown into a universe in which it has no fixed course of action, no final structure of meaning. There is only one absolute: the distinction between the “the being in itself” of objects and the “being for itself” of humans, who are “condemned to be free.” [...]

Awareness of such freedom can be terrifying. [...] But human beings are exceptionally good at hiding from our own freedom, a condition Sartre calls “bad faith” [self-deception or inauthenticity]. We treat our routine actions and familiar roles as if they were built into the order of the world, rather than something we are responsible for creating.\(^9\)

One way to keep believing that our “routine actions and familiar roles” are virtually ordained, rather than flowing from terrifyingly free choices, is to see ourselves as acting out cultural narratives, or what H. Porter Abbott, drawing on a number of earlier theorists, insists we call “masterplots.” He defines such structures as

Recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals, that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life. Masterplots can also exert an influence on the way we take in new information, causing us to overread or underread narratives in an often unconscious effort to bring them into conformity with a masterplot.\(^10\)

Thus – to translate from strictly narratological to cultural/historical terms – we read and realize masterplots as a way of understanding our own and our culture’s experience. For an individual, it is a short, easy step in either direction: to the over-reading with which we read ourselves into the plot or the under-reading we use to distance ourselves from the less savoury implications and consequences of some of these stories.

\(^8\) Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant* [1943; excerpt], in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, tr. & intro. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956): 244.


Examples of Australian masterplots are legion: Australia as the Lucky Country or the Workingman’s Paradise; Australia as a place ‘down under’ everybody else on the globe and so far away that its very remoteness exercises what Geoffrey Blainey, in his famous 1966 book by the same name, called a ‘tyranny of distance’ over its inhabitants; the imperative of mateship in a bush existence which somehow manages to be both superior to and infinitely more gruelling than the city life which more than three-fourths of the country actually experiences; the hostile landscape and climate that make mateship necessary; the Crocodile Dundees equipped to conquer both climate and landscape; the Cultural Cringe of Australians unsure of the relative worth of their own cultural products when compared to those of their series of literal and cultural colonizers, the doomed heroism of the Diggers – the list could be extended. But even this abbreviated version makes another of Abbott’s points: that “national culture is a complex weave of numerous, often conflicting, masterplots.” Thus authors choose to write, and in Carey’s work, characters choose to live some cultural masterplots rather than others, even though their choices may conflict with earlier or projected versions of the self and although they may be unaware even of the act of choosing. I want to argue that, nonetheless, until and unless Carey allows his characters to take self-con-Sci graphic charge of this process as their creator has done, and until and unless they accept the terrible freedom imposed by their choices and exercise that freedom to write narratives which elude the rigidity of masterplots, the bad fictions in which they find themselves trapped will reflect and perpetuate bad faith. In other words, masterplots seem to function, in the words with which Carey begins True History of the Kelly Gang, as either “lies” or “silences.” They either falsify experience by forcing it into predetermined patterns or they make crucial omissions which preclude characters from discovering and implementing authenticity in their lives. Masterplots are dangerous, and it is a rare Carey character that escapes their thrall.

I want to defend this thesis in two ways: first, by offering a brief and selective reprise of Carey’s fiction in order to make the point that this theme has engaged the author since he first began to publish (I cannot speak for his unpublished apprentice novels), and second, by following this theme more closely as it emerges through what Xavier Pons aptly calls the “ventriloquism” of Carey’s marvelous True History. In so doing, I hope to apply the

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11 Abbott, Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, 44.
close reading Carey has suggested not only as a hermeneutic tool, but as a way of celebrating the accomplishments of one of the handful of Australian writers most likely to “keep literature alive” for coming generations.

Masterplots in Carey’s Earlier Fiction

In Carey’s short stories, appearing in the decade preceding the 1981 release of his first published novel Bliss, characters succumb to the siren song of the masterplot with uniformly disastrous results. As in the much-praised story “American Dreams,” masterplots in the short fiction typically assume the form of culturally inflected ambitions: the dream of a revolution which produces a genuinely egalitarian rather than despotic or totalitarian government in “The Fat Man in History”; the dream here and in “The Chance” of a physical and social existence transparent to political and moral conviction; the dream of huge commercial success unimpeded by humanistic imperatives in “War Crimes”; the dream of the salvific effects of love in “‘Do You Love Me?’”; the dream of impenetrable defences in “A Windmill in the West”; or the American dream of commercial prosperity and cultural hegemony.

In every case, the characters who attempt to inhabit these dreamworlds and to actualize their promises find themselves instead bogged down in sterility, frustration, or moral quicksand and unable to shape their lives as they had hoped. Rather than offering authentic selfhood, the dreams distort lives in the direction of futility, stasis, or monstrosity (a trajectory we will see again in Carey).

In “American Dreams,” for example, a small Australian town attracts American tourism by means of a model of the town and its inhabitants, produced for ambiguous reasons by a resident, and showing the townsfolk going about their daily business (and monkey business). The town hopes for a number of benefits from this endeavour, including tourist dollars, of course, but also a sense of civic pride, and an appreciation for the beauties of small-town Australian life coupled with increased access to American products and popular culture. But the townspeople find that, in order to sell themselves to the Americans, they must be mired in the past. By growing “older and sadder” in the years since the model was constructed, the story’s first-person narrator feels “guilty that I have somehow let [the American tourists] down.”

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14 All of these stories can be found in Peter Carey, Collected Stories (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 1995).
15 Carey, Collected Stories, 181.
dividuality. And, of course, the town obliges, its people stultifying in the process.

Different modes of existence and the masterplots which impose them are also at the heart of the novel *Bliss*. Here, the ironically but proleptically named Harry Joy seeks a path out of the hell in which he finds himself after suffering an illuminating “death” on the novel’s first page. The stations along his Dantesque progress through hell, purgatory and, finally, heavenly bliss are marked by stories, specifically those he repeats from his father Vance and imposes upon his son David, initially without understanding them and thus without recognizing their potential for harm. 16 This potential is dramatically realized by David, who engineers his own useless and unnecessary execution in an attempt to act out one of these stories, dying with a “look of ugly surprise” 17 on his face which suggests a last-minute epiphany regarding the true nature of his exercise in heroism. Illumination also comes to his father Harry, but Carey leaves open the question of its efficacy.

The way out of hell, it turns out in this novel, comes not via Dante’s nine levels, but instead by negotiating three stages: seeing the world for what it is; seeing the self for what it is; and then remaking both in more authentic versions. Critics differ on whether this last act is accomplished during Harry’s edenic life with Honey Barbara in the hippy commune on Bog Onion Road. My own preference is to view Harry’s redemption with suspicion. It is true that Carey seems to grant him a life of great impact and efficacy in this period. He is the bearer of meaningful, now fully internalized and interpreted stories to a culture desperately seeking ceremony, ritual, legend, and the comforting messages they carry:

He had many friends. He was not only liked, he was also necessary. [...] he could tell a story for a funeral and a story for a birth. [...] He never thought of what he did as original. It wasn’t either. He told Vance’s old stories, but told them better because he now understood them. He retold the stories of Bog Onion Road. And when he told stories about the trees and the spirits of the forest he was only dramatizing things that people already knew, shaping them just as you pick up rocks scattered on the ground to make a cairn. He was merely sewing together the bright patchworks of lives, legends, myths, beliefs, hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a richer glow to all their lives. He knew when it was right to tell one story and not another. He knew how a

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story could give strength or hope. He knew stories, important stories, so sad he could hardly tell them for weeping.

And also he gave value to a story so that it was something of worth, as important, in its way, as a strong house or a good dam. He insisted that the story was not his, and not theirs either. You must give something, he told the children [...]. And what began as a game ended as a ritual. (290–91)

It all sounds very positive. Perhaps here is a character who has managed to extricate himself from cultural masterplots and write his own life story in such a way as to facilitate his search for an authentic life and selfhood. But notice that the stories he tells are not his own – in fact, are expressly disowned and offered to the culture under construction as fragments of its past with which to shore up a future. Notice, too, the insistence on stories as talismans against danger and as occasions for the practice of culture-sustaining ritual. These are not stories about the heady challenges of freedom. Further problematizing the issue is the fact that the novel’s last sentence informs us that the above judgement of Harry’s efficacy as a troubadour of his tribe is not offered by an omniscient narrator, but by the unnamed and unnumbered “children of Honey Barbara and Harry Joy” (296). Throughout the novel, these voices have apparently served as a sort of chorus to the play (comedy? tragedy?) which has been his life. Have the children, perhaps, made an invalid myth of Harry’s life with which to face down their own implacable freedom? Is the myth a lie? Is it a new and suspect masterplot? Carey leaves us to decide.

As its narrator Herbert Badgery warns us on the first page, the 1985 novel Illywhacker is a tissue of lies from beginning to end, a tale told by a con-man, signifying anything you (the customer / reader) desire. ‘Desire’ may be the operative word here, because this novel presents us with characters who display an almost erotic need to take featured roles in cultural masterplots, despite the potential or actual damage such roles threaten and their inability to provide a scaffolding for authenticity. Even at the overripe and literally incredible age of 139, and even after trying on for size virtually every lie his culture has on display, including those of gender, Herbert remains so fractured and inchoate that he sometimes speaks of himself in both the first and third person within a single paragraph.18 And yet, the lies do seem to be pilot projects for individual and national, albeit inauthentic, identity. Moreover, they are inescapable and, like the story of the torn-off finger, which is only “for the moment, a lie” (120), they have a way of engineering themselves into reality. Herbert muses:

18 Peter Carey, Illywhacker (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1985), 26. Further page references are in the main text.
Lies, dreams, visions – they were everywhere. We brushed them aside as carelessly as spider webs across a garden path. They clung to us, of course, adhered to our clothes and trailed behind us but we were too busy arguing to note their presence. (326)

The lies are also busy, however, working their insidious magic, shaping people in their own images. This point is hammered home at the end of the novel in the description of the “best pet shop in the world” as an emporium of Australian archetypes – shearers, bushmen, lifesavers, inventors, manufacturers, Aboriginals, even a Melbourne Jew and an Illywhacker – all doing their best to fill their respective moulds and do what their respective myths demand. Self-examination is a nuisance in such a process, but even when practised it is not guaranteed to interrupt or suspend the role-playing. For Herbert, self-knowledge is not an opening to authenticity; it may not even be self-knowledge. Leah Goldstein accuses him near the end of the novel of plagiarizing his stories and underestimating the self that has emerged from them (548–49). The suggestion is thus lodged that his stories may not be his at all and that, even if they are, they may (like Harry Joy’s early versions) be misinterpreted. The novel ends bleakly, with the ominous prediction of “interesting times ahead” (600), and apparently no hope of an authentic self to confront them.

Graham Huggan has written of Carey’s fictions that they register – largely failed – attempts to move beyond the bounds of the present: to imagine other pasts and futures that might discharge the curse of sameness. For if there is a fear, above all others, in Carey’s anxiety-ridden fictions, it is the fear of repetition, of entrapment in a self-perpetuating structure.¹⁹

Such a fear is certainly felt by Herbert Badgery at the end of Illywhacker, but, as Huggan also notices, this fear is cultural and collective as well as individual. This is because of the curious effect that masterplots have on history. Carey says over and over in Illywhacker that to accept the lie, the myth, the masterplot, is to abrogate one history but, paradoxically and seductively, to enable another. Thus, as Carey has his imaginary historian M.V. Anderson point out, the lie of terra nullius, “‘that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated’,” permits the white invaders “‘to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience’.” This lie, says Anderson, is the “‘great foundation stone’” (456) of Australian history. It is also one that will increasingly engage Carey through subsequent fiction and in his fictionalized memoir 30 Days in Sydney, and one that blocks the

roads of the title characters in Carey’s next and, I would argue, best novel to date, *Oscar and Lucinda*.

Because this novel became the first of two Carey works to earn the Booker Prize, a great deal of critical attention has already, and deservedly, been paid to it. Here, I want only to raise the question of whether either Oscar or Lucinda lifts the curse of repetition and enters into some sort of authentic selfhood.

In Oscar’s case, the answer seems clearly to be “no.” He is literally sunk by the lies of history, the fraudulent cultural masterplots, that splinter his ludicrous glass church and crash in around him. Carey makes clear that the church represents, at least in part, the failed imposition of Western biblically-based culture on a landscape already saturated with persistent and prehistoric mythologies. He writes of Oscar’s progress up-river:

> The country was thick with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slippery leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence. [...] In this landscape every rock had a name, and most names had spirits, ghosts, meanings.\(^{20}\)

Such a land has no room and no use for alien Western stories and the values they urge. This is also the landscape in which Darkwood, for example, is reportedly named for its dark foliage, but in fact traces the appellation to an atrocity committed against Aboriginal men, women, and children at a place then called “Darkies’ Point” (2). In such a blood-soaked and overdetermined landscape, Oscar’s insane project of delivering the church is bound to fail, just as his love for Lucinda must find only a displaced, disastrous, and wildly disproportionate expression in his sexual encounter with Miriam Chadwick. But his failures extend beyond even these. As Simon During points out, Oscar fails at the end of the novel “both to escape from his struggles with his father and to sustain a strong inner self.”\(^{21}\) This latter failure, During suggests, may be linked to the author’s concern in the novel to interrogate the very institutions – art and literature – that have engendered it. In this interpretation, Oscar’s entrapment becomes emblematic of a danger Carey uneasily recognizes as one with which he himself is threatened: a danger I would figure as that of masterplot reinforcement and the inauthenticity in which it cages its adepts.

Among its many resonances, the imagery of glass that pervades the novel, particularly in the form of the Prince Rupert’s Drop, which seems immune to pressure but shatters when attacked in a certain way, may suggest the nature

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of authenticity: it would be “joyous and paradoxical,” exhibiting strength and vulnerability, lovely and dangerous, transparent but fragile, offering limitless choice but imposing consequences for choices made, “as good a material as any to build a life from” (135). Lucinda seems to know this, but Oscar mistakes the protean nature of glass. Attempting to shape it to his own purposes, which are those enjoined by the masterplot of a questing knight seeking the hand of a princess, he instead must watch his life, his love, and his hopes craze and implode.

Oscar’s case, therefore, seems fairly clear-cut. He is trapped in bad faith and the inability to plot his own life as surely as he is trapped in the sinking and splintered church. Lucinda’s fate is more problematic. As he will later do with Tristan, the protagonist of the The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith, Carey leaves the reader with hints of an authentic life for Lucinda, in which the freedom imposed by sudden poverty offers the opening she needs to remake herself in closer accord with ideals and ideas she has always espoused. Yet all the reader is allowed to know of this life to come is the narrator’s comment that, in the future, Lucinda would be

known for more important things than her passion for a nervous clergyman. She was famous, or famous at least amongst students of the Australian labour movement. One could look at this letter [responding to Miriam Chadwick’s refusal to decline the estate she had won in Oscar and Lucinda’s bet] and know that its implicit pain and panic would be but a sharp jab in the long and fruitful journey of her life. One could view it as the last thing before her real life could begin. (506)

Perhaps such a “real life” is hard for even Carey to imagine, and is therefore not described. Or perhaps, as he hints in the novel’s short, penultimate chapter, authentic and individually plotted lives are like natural growths: like the thistles that overrun the grounds where Oscar’s salvaged church once stood. Considering them, the narrator muses: “There are no stories to tell about thistles” (508).22

A similarly ‘real’ or at least ‘realer’ life seems to have been planned for the protagonist of Carey’s next and much less successful novel, The Tax Inspector. Of Benny Catchprice, the blighted angel, and the fictional fate Carey planned for him, the author has said:

I began with the ending, wanting to oppose child birth with this predatory sexual drive, somebody that would become Benny, and I thought birth was

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22 In his 1997 interview with Lisa Meyer, Carey also suggests that “the thistles seemed to me indicative of what would replace or what was replacing Christian stories in the culture.” See Meyer, “Interview,” 81.
going to win – the power of birth – it’s going to overcome all evil – a very simple idea. Then when I had to construct the character of Benny, I started to think, Well, he’s been sexually abused, that’s all, and so I set off, and I really didn’t quite think what it was going to do to my story. [...] [My plot, therefore] was perhaps driven by the desire to create some sort of white magic to dispel the forces of darkness in the world or something like that, because this child had been born and it was a powerful and wonderful experience.  

Birth as a symbol and site of redemption: surely one of the most familiar masterplots in Western culture.

The novel was also meant to affirm the possibility of change, of taking existential charge of one’s choices and using them to reconstruct the self. Near the end of the novel, Jack Catchprice reflects on this possibility in an exchange with Maria Takis, the Virgin-Mary figure of the novel and herself impervious to change, because she is, as Jack recognizes, “a woman with a clear and simple sense of right and wrong. [...] She was a moralist.” Jack, however, needs and yearns to refashion himself. He asks her: “‘If no one can change [...] what point is there in anything? If we cannot affect each other’s lives, we might as well call it a day.’ [...] ‘If we can’t change’ [...] ‘we’re dead’” (251–52).

So change and salvation were in store for Benny. Damaged and deranged by his past and by what he dreads in his future, Benny would attempt a renaissance, good would triumph in the birth of Maria’s baby, and Benny would be “‘transformed through love’” (252). But this plan, like several of the novel’s characters, eventually seemed too programmatic to the author. Rather than allowing himself to be trapped in a masterplot which seemed to deny the imperatives of character and to impose upon them inauthentic choices, Carey altered the novel’s ending to make it much more ambivalent and disturbing. As published, the novel has Maria, who gives birth while held captive in Benny’s nightmarish basement stronghold, bludgeon him to death with an iron bar in order to reclaim her child, without recognizing that in his moment of awkwardly holding the baby, Benny “was as near as he had ever been to love” (278).

Redemption is therefore denied to Benny Catchprice. Bending over his body, Maria for the first time sees the angel wing tattooed on his back, but compares it to “a dragon fly, like something smashed against the windscreen of a speeding car” (279). The faculty of transformation, like the dragon-fly’s wing, seems disabled. Perhaps Benny was too badly crippled – morally and

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psychologically – ever to be otherwise. The novel thus ends in a kind of moral confusion which achieves authentic characterization at the expense of authorial clarity.

The exploration of monstrosity in several forms reappears in Carey’s next, perhaps most challenging novel, _The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith_ (1994), but here the physical deformity of the title character, rather than reflecting inner corruption, stands in sharp contrast to Tristan’s potential as a full and fully human being. Moreover, his many physical debilities are not the only kinds of malformations the novel traces. Carey is also very interested in the dynamics of cultural imposition and hegemony which occur when a superpower interacts with a satellite state.

Although there are a number of ways to read the imaginary countries of Voorstand and Efica which the novel treats (and even maps), obviously one way is to link Voorstand allegorically to the USA and Efica to Australia. Even the character of Tristan himself can be seen as representing Australia: he has mixed and uncertain parenthood which includes representatives of American and European colonizing powers as progenitors; he is stalked and threatened by the superpower and its inimical agents; he finds himself seduced by Voorstand culture and values while at the same time resisting their appropriation of his sense of self; and he is ‘deformed’ away from authentic individuality by these conflicts and by what Carey has called the “scars of colonialism.” There is a great deal to say about the complex of attraction and repulsion, fear and longing, imitation and repudiation in Efica’s attitude towards Voorstand as it is explored in this novel. For our purposes here, however, I want to engage only the question of whether or not Tristan as a character is granted an authentic selfhood, and whether that is achieved in part through his rejection of the masterplot or metanarrative of the superiority of Voorstand culture and the juggernaut of its worldwide dissemination.

The question arises because, as Lisa Meyer notes in her 1997 interview with Carey, at a crucial point in the novel Tristan’s life is saved by the fact that he dons the costume of Bruder Mouse, a Voorstand cultural icon and an important bearer of Voorstandish religious mythology. Meyer asks: “Is this a symbolic way of saying that in order for a citizen of a colonized country to survive, he has to assimilate the dominant culture to a certain extent?” Carey answers that “It really wasn’t my intention, but it works like that.” If this is the case, then assuming at least fragments of the hegemonic culture, or play-

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ing one’s part in its pageant (Tristan, theatrically trained, is literally acting Bruder Mouse), becomes a necessary survival strategy, even if also an abrogation of individual authenticity.

In his book on Carey, however, Bruce Woodcock reads the meaning of Tristan’s concealment in the Bruder Mouse costume very differently. He says:

In adopting the Mouse costume, Tristan enacts the kind of subaltern retaliation and destabilisation effected through a post-colonial “mimicry” of dominant colonial forces such as that envisaged by Homi Bhabha, a mimicry which is “at once resemblance and menace,” a “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”

If this is the case, then Tristan’s act might be ‘Efficacious’ after all, and a site of opposition rather than acquiescence to hegemony.

I would tend to take the side of Woodcock in this debate; but to shift the enquiry from the postcolonial to the personal at this point is to see that Tristan’s time imitating Bruder Mouse for the enraptured Peggy Kram is also a period in which he must utterly abnegate selfhood. When he shows his true face behind the mask, Peggy is repulsed and appalled. Before this, she has been so enthralled by the masterplot of early Voorstandish purity and piety that she believes in the actual, historical existence of Bruder Mouse and in Tristan as his reincarnation. She tells a sceptical associate:

“When the Saints walked Voorstand, that is how it was […]. We were decent people then. The Sirkus was not just an entertainment. Bruder Mouse was not a clown. […] We did not have all these codicils and revisions to the old laws. […] We did not rape and murder. We did not thieve. We were better then.”

The being she believes is Bruder Mouse seems to offer a way back to those better days. He brings the legends to life, and Peggy’s mad plan is to impose a similar agenda on all of Saarlim City, forcing contemporary Voorstanders to re-enact the historical roles she imagines for their forbears. This would be the end of any authentic individual life for anyone, and its proposition coincides with a literal threat on the life of Tristan. To save himself, Tristan must resume himself, and Carey signals this shift by having the first-person narrator refer to himself as “he” before the event and “I” after (410). The necessity to flee is made even more pronounced when Peggy decides to write him into another of her theological masterplots, casting the revealed Tristan now as the satanic “Hairy Man,” rather than the saintly Bruder Mouse (411).

28 Bruce Woodcock, Peter Carey, 111. See also Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994): 86–88.
In his escape from Voorstand, Tristan tells us that he was “more alive than ever in [his] life before” and that his “unusual life was really just beginning” (414). Although he again dons the Mouse costume as a disguise, it now serves his own authentic purposes, rather than smothering his identity beneath the expectations of a foreign and hostile hegemony. As was also true for Lucinda in *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey gives us no details of the “unusual life” which will follow on Tristan’s Voorstandish adventures. But, for both characters, the suggestion is that this will be a life lived beyond masterplots, one plotted by and for themselves.

*Jack Maggs*, the eponymous protagonist of the next Carey novel (1997), also has to make his own life, but first he has to take care of unfinished business. *Jack Maggs*, as the character’s name suggests, is a much elaborated extrapolation from the character of Abel Magwitch in the Dickens novel *Great Expectations* (1860–61), and, like Magwitch, he must come to terms with his relationship to the England which exiled him to an Australian penal colony and the people whose betrayals were instrumental in this process. But Carey’s Maggs must also come to terms with an Australia which, at the end of the novel, he elects as his true home, site of his authentic selfhood. Carey makes clear that this is an authorially endorsed choice, both liberating in itself and proof that Maggs has achieved the liberation of self that puts such choices within reach. It is ironic, of course, that his prison should become his place of real emancipation, but it is an irony that persists into present-day Australia, whose inhabitants often celebrate convict ancestry and the pride of place that has supplanted shame in their descendants.

The process of staking a claim on home and self begins for Maggs in the series of letters he writes to the son with whom he has hoped to become reconciled, the Pip figure of the novel. These letters represent a kind of counter-narrative to the one being extracted from him through hypnosis by Tobias Oates (a figure so Dickensian he may actually be Dickens), who is hoping to use Maggs’s story in his next novel. Their series of encounters is torturing and psychically damaging to both characters, but Maggs eventually emerges from it with a strong and unmistakable voice which, one critic says, has “remastered[ed] his own text” and overcome the “anxieties of intertextuality” by articulating authentic selfhood.\(^{30}\) It is this self that he takes back to Australia with Mercy Larkin, and with obviously prolific results. Carey’s description of Jack’s final dispensation emphasizes this, as well as its difference from the

\(^{30}\) See Elizabeth Ho, “Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* and the Trauma of Convictism,” *Antipodes* 17.2 (2003): 124–32; see also Hassall, “A Tale of Two Countries: *Jack Maggs* and Peter Carey’s Fiction,” *Australian Literary Studies* 18.2 (1997): 128–35. Hassall notes that no other Carey novel is as “deeply concerned as *Jack Maggs* is with the actual processes by which novelists gather, transform, and inscribe their material” (131).
fictional shape it will take in Oates’s eventually published novel, called *The Death of Maggs*:

There is no character like Mercy in *The Death of Maggs*, no young woman to help the convict recognize the claims of Richard and John [sons Maggs had left behind in Australia] to have a father kiss them good night. [...] she not only civilized these first two children, but very quickly gave birth to five further members of “That Race.” [...] *The Death of Maggs*, having been abandoned by its grief-stricken author in 1837, was not begun again until 1859. The first chapters did not appear until 1860, that is, three years after the real Jack Maggs had died, not in the blaze of fire Tobias had always planned for him, but in a musty high-ceilinged bedroom above the flood-brown Manning River. Here, with his weeping sons and daughters crowded round his bed, the old convict met death without ever having read “That Book.”

The paralleling of “That Race” with “That Book” clearly privileges the former. Life supersedes and outstrips text, particularly when that life perpetuates itself in children and author(ize)s itself in authenticity.

**Masterplots in *True History of the Kelly Gang***

It should be clear by now that Carey, in his fiction, has always been, and remains, engaged with the possibility of individual, authentic selfhood, built out of choice and on the recognition of existential freedom, a selfhood flourishing apart from the cultural masterplots that offer comfort and a sort of canned identity at the expense of growth and self-discovery. That such an escape from masterplot is difficult is proved by the fact that so few Carey characters manage it – we might nominate Lucinda, Tristan, and Jack Maggs, with Harry Joy’s position, as I noted, ambiguous – and even in cases where it may have been accomplished, its dimensions are barely limned by the author. Still, authenticity as at least a tantalizing prospect continues to be central to Carey’s second Booker Prize-winning novel, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, which appeared in 2000.

Of course, the Kelly Gang is a real historical phenomenon, although even calling this small band of literal and figurative brothers a ‘gang’ begins to suggest constricting categories of judgement and evaluation. In fact, the gang was made up of four young men – Kelly, his brother Dan, Joe Byrne, and Steve Hart – whose fabled exploits begin with the shooting of the trooper Fitzpatrick in 1878 (an incident in which at least two of the four were not even involved), and continue through the Stringybark Creek killings of three

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policemen in October of that year and the holdups of banks in December 1878 and February 1879. This last robbery was also the occasion for the composition of the famous “Jerilderie Letter,” which formed the Jamesian germ of the novel and in which Ned Kelly attempts a sort of vindication of what some saw as the gang’s murderous rampage. The end for the gang came in June 1880, in the ferocious firefight at Glenrowan with which Carey opens his novel, and the end came for Ned, who barely survived the shootout, by hanging on November 11 of that year. Purportedly, his last words on the gallows were “Such is life.”

The story has fascinated Australians from the beginning, not least because the Kelly Outrage, as it was sometimes called, and the Kelly execution which finished it effectively represented the end of the bushranging era in Australia. This is a time which itself had spawned or revivified a number of cultural masterplots: the story of oppressed Irish convicts, emancipists, and currency lads cheated, harassed, robbed, and generally abused by the Anglo power-structure; the related story of small selectors hounded by the prosperous squattocracy; the story of the bravery and superb bushmanship conveyed in the colloquial simile ‘as game as Ned Kelly’; the story of unswerving mateship maintained in the face of overwhelming odds; and the story of the charming larrikin whose misdeeds are more mischief than malice. That Kelly himself has become a cultural icon is demonstrated by the fact that, according to Andreas Gaile, more than 1,200 books have been written on Kelly and his part in the bushranging phenomenon, not to mention innumerable popular ballads, poems, and stories, as well as the Sidney Nolan series of paintings and a spate of dramatic treatments in plays, films, and television programmes.

But I am interested here in the impact these masterplots have on the character of Ned Kelly as Carey creates him and on his own search for an authentic life. We can see that impact, I will argue, in three aspects of the novel: its title, its multiple narrative frames, and the stories by means of which Ned shapes and understands his own experiences.

The novel’s title immediately presents the reader with a double conundrum. First, why is this document offered as the history of the gang and not of Ned Kelly himself, who in popular consciousness is so fully equivalent to the group that the Oxford Companion to Australian Literature contains no separate


ate entry on the gang, but treats only Kelly? And secondly, why is this document denominated only as ‘true history’ rather than ‘a true history’ or ‘the true history’? Perhaps the answer to the first question is that when Kelly composes the documents which (with much editing and framing, a matter to which we will return) becomes the text in our hands, he has no sense of self apart from the gang. He is Kelly because he is the leader of the Kelly gang, and to be Kelly means little else to the hunted fugitive who is composing the text. He is running for his life as he begins the notes which he hopes will exonerate him in the eyes of the daughter (wholly fictional) he has never seen and will never meet. Thus, simple verisimilitude might dictate that he would be preoccupied with the gang activities, and might therefore so title his text. Another possibility is that the title isn’t his at all but, rather, appended by one of the many hands through which the document passes on its way to us. Yet the implication remains that Ned Kelly cannot write directly about ‘Ned Kelly’ because he does not yet know who that person is; the process of telling his story – as is so often true in literature and legend – is meant to locate and convey the meaning Ned seeks. The answer to the second question therefore follows: the novel is not a or the true history, because it is only Ned’s true history: his sad and ultimately futile attempt to find the truth, the heart, the authenticity in his life and to preserve it as the only inheritance he can offer his daughter. Thus he opens his narrative with these words:

I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false.

Pointedly, telling the ‘truth’ here is a prerequisite of salvation; locating that truth is also required for recognizing an authentic self.

The novel must thus represent the truth as Ned sees it, but his version is immediately problematized, not only by the many departures from historical fact which Carey allows him (including, most spectacularly, the invention of his lover Mary Hearn and their daughter), but also by the series of narrative

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35 Carey, True History, 7. Further references are in the main text. I have remarked elsewhere on the effect of the lack of punctuation Carey employs in such passages. The choice is in part due to the influence exerted on Carey by the “Jerilderie Letter,” but it also gives the text the feel of a headlong rush toward disaster and predetermined fate which makes Ned’s project all the more urgent. See Carolyn Bliss, “Imagining the Truth: Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang,” Antipodes 15.1 (2001): 47–48. See also Ned Kelly, The Jerilderie Letter, ed. Alex McDermott (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 2001).
frames with which Carey surrounds and incarcerates Ned’s narrative. To begin with, there is the outermost frame of two terrible and bloody tales. The first, which opens the novel, recounts part of the battle at Glenrowan in which all the gang members except Kelly are killed. It is attributed to an “Undated, unsigned, handwritten account in the collection of the [nonexistent] Melbourne Public Library (V.L.10453)” (4). The second story, completely unattributed as to authorship, describes Ned’s botched hanging and closes the book. Inside this frame are the pedantic and strangely irrelevant notes of Thomas Curnow, which introduce each of the thirteen “parcels” of documents that constitute the body of the text. Curnow is a character who violated one masterplot (that of mateship and the solidarity of underdogs) in a failed attempt to inhabit another (that of the mighty hero who slays the dragon), and who winds up not with the hand of a princess but, ironically, as the caretaker of his victim’s literary estate. Perhaps in an effort to distance himself from his deeds, Curnow’s prefatory notes to the thirteen “parcels” of Ned’s story concentrate largely on the physical state of these documents: torn, stained, written hurriedly and on papers often stolen or improvised. He presents them as otherwise unadulterated and wholly genuine in content. However, their fidelity to Ned’s original intentions is called into question by the mysterious “S.C.” (Curnow’s son or grandson, perhaps?), who pens the third-person narrative of “The Siege at Glenrowan” that precedes the description of Ned’s hanging, and who may also have authored the untitled account of the same events with which the novel opens. S.C. remarks that

The evidence provided by the manuscript [ie, Kelly’s thirteen parcels] suggests that in the years after the Siege of Glenrowan [Thomas Curnow] continued to labour obsessively over the construction of the dead man’s sentences, and it was he who made those small grey pencil marks with which the original manuscript is decorated. (350)

Thus, Ned’s story may have been substantively edited to an indeterminable degree even before we read it.

In addition, the ‘manuscript’ includes interpolations of news clippings which are actual news articles from the period but shaped and amended by Carey.36 Some of these, we are told, were corrected for accuracy by Ned himself (see, for example, 310), and some were putatively edited by Mary Hearn to reflect her versions of events, although, in at least one case, her comment has been partly obliterated by some unknown hand (295). A further deferral of authority comes in Parcel 8, which is introduced with a note from Curnow claiming that “Pages describing the shooting of Constable Fitzpatrick are

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much revised by a second hand reliably presumed to be that of Joe Byrne” (183). Since all of the parcels were supposedly handed over to Curnow just before the debacle at Glenrowan which took Byrne’s life, it is hard to imagine how this rewriting could have occurred; it may instead reflect Curnow’s agenda – that passages most persuasively exonerating the outlaw be rendered suspect. The reader will never know.

The effect of all this extradiegetic framing, editing, revision, and omission is neatly summed up by Graham Huggan: “the voice through which [the narrative] claims to speak is never Kelly’s own.”37 Carey’s purpose in these progressive removals seems to be twofold. First, they make the point that there is no such thing as uninflected historical accuracy, an assertion which has by now become a commonplace of both postcolonial and postmodern criticism. But secondly, and beyond this, they suggest that Ned is ambushed from all sides by masterplots. He desperately wants to construct his own narrative, especially after the failure of his two attempts to communicate his take on events (in a letter to what might be a sympathetic government official and in the “Jerilderie Letter,” both of which are suppressed). But he is hedged around by people who want to write him into metanarratives of their own choosing. To Mary, he must be a knight errant, to Curnow a dastardly villain, to some of the reporters a savage beast who must be brought to bay, to many of his compatriots a kind of hounded Robin Hood. With all these voices and visions contending for his narrative, it is no wonder that the ‘true’ Ned Kelly must struggle to emerge.

The framing of the story in accounts of Ned’s darkest days – defeat at Glenrowan and execution in Melbourne – also shadows the narrative with a sense of impending doom which no rewriting of events can evade or lighten. Instead of giving us a character who can remake his life through meaningful choices, Carey provides us with a sort of Sisyphus-figure, confronted with an absurdly unfair fate and offered only the single option of making his life meaningful within its constraints.38 Unfairness is one of the novel’s persistent refrains, as in this passage in which Ned reflects on his mother’s imprison-

And here is the thing about them men they was Australians they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might

never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be forced to wear the white hood in prison he knew what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the eye and [...] the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and marrow. (299)

In this passage, the knowledge and experience of injustice are imagined as almost genetically transmitted through generations of the afflicted. But Ned immediately adds to this lament “I seen proof that if a man could tell his true history to Australians he might be believed” (299). Against all odds and evidence, he retains a faith in the power of discourse and the power of truth to right wrongs and alleviate injustice. The novel does not bear him out in this hope, but it does endorse his belief in the potency of narrative.

It is through stories that Ned tries to make sense of himself and his life. Unfortunately, however, he often sites these stories within masterplots which compel them to take on inauthentic meanings. This danger is particularly emphasized by two book-ended tales which act as additional narrative frames, one coming very early in the text and the other near its close. They are the stories of “A Certain Man” who turns out to be Ned’s father and of the tortured horse, a narrative which both glosses and deconstructs Ned’s father’s practice of sometimes wearing a woman’s dress (11–12, 274–78).

The stories have much in common. They both chronicle events at ‘home’ in Ireland, both involve political activism and betrayal, both are told as acts of revenge and in hopes of changing the way people and practices are perceived by the listeners; both are horrific. From the first story, Ned learns that his father was transported to Van Diemen’s Land as part of a plea bargain which saved him from the gallows. His side of the bargain was to betray those that he himself had enlisted in a conspiracy to murder a landlord, slaughter his wife and children, and torch their home. Ned rightly reads this story as a shameful episode, but for him, the shame inheres much more in the betrayal than in the violence. Loyalty to one’s family and mates is the masterplot by which Ned lives his life, and vigilante justice often presents itself to the adult Ned as the only option for the poor and oppressed.

The later story is told by Mary Hearn, in part as a way of clearing up a mystery which has been left unsolved since the novel’s first section: the question of why grown men (Ned’s father, but later also Steve Hart and Ned’s brother Dan) sometimes ride around the countryside dressed as women. Their acts turn out to be pale parodies of those of the Sons of Sive, a group of Irish rebels who disguise themselves in dresses when “they wish to scare the bejesus” (273) out of their English enemies, yet succeed, says Mary, only in inflicting pointless terrorism. She describes, in wrenching detail, one of their acts, in which they torture to death a horse whose only offence is to be owned by an English lord and to bear a “white blaze upon its forehead [...] exactly in
the shape of the map of Ireland” (274). Mary’s father was a blacksmith, who was stabling the horse when this atrocity was committed, and the men who killed the horse were his mates. Yet Mary announces proudly that although

My da were a United Man [...] he give evidence against them all and I will tell you boys if you wish to ride around in this costume the people will not love you. You must ease their lives not bring them terror. (278)

Mary’s father betrayed the conspirators, as did Ned’s, but she is able to see that these acts carry very different significations: what was cowardly and self-serving on the part of Ned’s father is heroic and morally right on the part of hers. More importantly, Mary recognizes that the masterplot of the Sons of Sieve cannot be transplanted onto Australian soil. What may once have been political action had been corrupted into sheer viciousness even before being transported to Australia; here it becomes only senseless (not subversive) mimicry. The story of the butchered horse makes the further point that symbolic action may have heinous flesh-and-blood consequences. The horse was murdered by a masterplot.

To make this point may have been Carey’s intention in pairing and comparing these narratives, but, sadly, their import is lost on Ned. He continues to deform his actions into predetermined plotlines where they are misshapen and misunderstood, as much by himself as by the readers he hopes to persuade.

In some cases, such as the one discussed above, the problem is that the masterplots simply don’t translate well. Cuchulainn, Dedriu, Mebd, the Banshee, St Brigit, the changeling child, the Tipperary wife who showed her husband how to cheat the Devil, the curse of Kevin the Rat-Catcher – these stories wilt in the dry, sceptical, pragmatic Australian cultural climate. When the bushranger Harry Power begins to tell young Ned the tale of meeting the Devil on the Melbourne road, Ned’s immediate response is to question its veracity. He is similarly suspicious of the ‘curse’ plaguing his family after Kevin is refused his grog, and remarks that Brigit “withered in Victoria she could no longer help the calving and thus slowly passed from our reckoning” (88).

Other stories are perverted into bearing meanings and endorsing values that they did not originally carry. Curnow, for example, flatters Ned by likening him to the unlettered narrator of *Lorna Doone*, a book Ned has treasured, only in order to wheedle his history away from him. The schoolmaster also quotes the stirring call to battle at Agincourt from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* only to inspire men and boys he knows are about to be massacred in the shootout at Glenrowan (337–40). Such deployments of narrative represent deliberate and strategic misuse, but the process may also occur unintentionally. Perusing newspaper accounts of the American Civil War, Ned begins to conflate the ironclad ships *Virginia* and *Monitor* with the image of “an engine like Great
Cuchulainn in his war chariot and falsely believes that the ludicrous and cumbersome armour he constructs for the Glenrowan battle will make him invulnerable (324). Here two masterplots of combat converge, compounding the damage they can do to those who try to live by them.

Mostly, however, and most crucially, the stories of True History serve to confine the characters, particularly Ned, in predetermined roles that they feel they must enact. The novel is rife with images of imprisonment, of course, but often the limits characters face are imposed not by locks and bars, but by narrative. There are stories demanding that Ned shoot Bill Frost for deserting his mother, that he not cooperate with “the traps” (118), that he fight Wild Wright and, upon winning, fight anyone else who wants to challenge the champion, that he honour and remain loyal to Harry Power, that he stay in Australia because his mother is imprisoned there, even when Mary begs him to escape to America, and, most tragically, that he fulfil the role he has been cast in since childhood. Locked up for the first time, Ned reflects: “I were finally in that place ordained from the moment of my birth” (97). As we have already noted, doom threatens Ned from the novel’s first page, not least because it is predicted by the masterplots which manipulate him.

Thus, while Ned declares defiantly to his ‘gang’ that “we would write our own damned history from here on” (245), and although he tries repeatedly to do so and to get that history heard, he can, as it turns out, write and act only according to the plots which his culture has bequeathed him. Fate, as embodied in these stories, is inexorable. What the commentator S.C. remarks about Ned’s armour applies as well to his futile life: “It seemed there was no machine ever invented that could protect these people from the forces God had placed upon the earth” (347). Ned has believed that narrative can create reality, to the extent that he tells his future daughter “I wrote to get you born” (321). Carey’s point here seems to be that it can, but that if individuals allow themselves to fall into narrative patterns, they become subject to forces so adamant as to seem divinely ordained; and, at this point, events outstrip authorial intent. Thus, in S.C.’s version of the Glenrowan shootout,

\[\text{He opened the door to the front room where he had, a short time before,}\]
\[\text{confidently laboured on his history. At that time he would see his child again.}\]
\[\text{At that time he would release his mother. At that time these people would}\]

\[39\text{ A case might be made for an oedipal reading of Ned’s character, since he believes he kills his father, who dies after serving a jail sentence for a crime Ned committed, and since his loyalty to his mother causes his mates to accuse him of loving her as other men love their ‘donahs’. It is also interesting to note that a postcolonial reading of the novel might produce the observation that after her husband’s death, Ellen Kelly is successively ‘colonized’ first by an Englishman in the person of Bill Frost and then by the American George King.}\]
occupy their own land without fear or favour, but now the world was a filthy mire and mess. (348)

Such is the detritus of masterplot.

Ironically, of course, this truncated and wasted life itself takes on immortality as a potent masterplot of its own: a legend for Australians to use in seeking postcolonial notions of national identity:

It is through the simplified and selective narratives of collective myths that historical events are rendered emotionally comprehensible and memorable. Mythic narratives are thus the wellspring of nationalism, and they are constantly mobilised to serve differing ideological and political interests.  

So the incubating myth of the anti-authoritarian Kelly Gang, as it enters popular consciousness, begins to enable and authorize the simplistic nationalism that Kelly’s fight against the established order in Australia was meant to challenge. He loses this battle like all the others: his requests that his body be buried in consecrated ground and that his mother be released from jail are ignored; and his legacy, never really under his control in the first place, is distorted into little more than an elegy of brave failure in the face of overwhelming odds.

Carey as Escape Artist

It might be objected at this point that there is little new here; after all, we have known at least since Jean–François Lyotard’s landmark book The Postmodern Condition (1979) about the bankruptcy of metanarrative. Helen Tiffin makes a similar point when she speaks of the necessity of “dismantling [...] European codes” and the “postcolonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses.” But Tiffin goes on to remark that

Decolonization is process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centric systems and peripheral subversions of them; between European or British discourses and the post-colonial dis/mantling.

Carey is fascinated by this process, certainly as seen in cultures throwing off the yoke of literal or cultural colonialism, but also and equally in the individual’s effort to free himself from colonizing metanarrative and begin to

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inhabit authentic selfhood. If decolonization is an always unfinished process for a culture, where arrival into pure postcoloniality is infinitely deferred, how much more so for an individual confronting persistent, inherited and seductive metanarratives with their colonizing tendency to impose meaning which violates that which is created by choices made in existential freedom. I want, finally, to argue that it is a process Peter Carey not only inflicts on his protagonists, but undergoes himself.

What does it mean for a writer of fiction to be wary of the snare of storytelling? We get hints from the Carey oeuvre, but it is also worth remarking that the theme is foregrounded in Carey’s latest work. In My Life as a Fake (2003), Carey imagines the perpetrator of a literary hoax menaced and eventually led to his death by his creation come to life and the events which follow on that incarnation. The plot (with obvious and openly acknowledged debts to the Ern Malley hoax in 1940s Australia) and the epigraph from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein could not be more forthright in warning of the potential lethality of narrative imagination run amok and into dangerous channels. In addition, the book’s title, which is also the title of the manuscript that preoccupies the central characters, suggests that misspent imagination can engender inauthenticity. But this is a trap Carey’s fiction has avoided.

For Carey, an awareness that the imagination may succumb to the lure of masterplot means clear sighted recognition of the imperative continually to “make it new,” as Ezra Pound memorably decreed – that is, to invoke, allude to, and interrogate the masterplots, but always to escape them into fresh fictional territory. This may explain why – although there are undeniable thematic, stylistic, and genre threads that can be traced through Carey’s work – each novel comes as something of a joyous surprise. Carey is always wriggling out from under expectations, doing something daring, daring something unprecedented. In this perpetual exploration and invention, he has found an authentic literary voice, one of the most rewarding to be heard in anglophone fiction today. Emily Dickinson once wrote that “The Possible’s slow fuse is lit / By the Imagination.” Carey’s imagination seems firmly fused to any number of possibilities; and the explosions make beautiful fireworks.

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44 Ezra Pound, Make It New (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).


Dead White Male Heroes

True History of the Kelly Gang,
and Ned Kelly in Australian Fictions

SUSAN K. MARTIN

In Australia’s cultural psyche Ned Kelly is [...] our Atticus Finch.

IN AUGUST 2002 the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Australia, Jim Soorley, launched a program called ‘One Book, One Brisbane,’ designed to get the local populace all reading together. The notion was borrowed, according to Soorley, from a programme in Chicago, where the book chosen for 2001 was Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mocking Bird (1960). The book selected for the whole of Brisbane to read and discuss was Peter Carey’s Booker and Commonwealth Prize-winning novel, True History of the Kelly Gang (2000). In his comparison of the US and Australian “One Books,” Soorley

1 A different version of this essay appears in Imagining Australia, ed. Judith Ryan & Chris Wallace–Crabbe (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004), and this version is published with the kind permission of the editors and of Harvard University Press. It was written with the support of Harvard University, and my employer, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.


identified both books as featuring “heroes” who “fight the fight that needs fighting.” The fight he identifies in the Australian example is one about “dispossession and poverty” and immigration; whether “our society remains cohesive and one that tolerates difference.” The Lord Mayor comments: “The Irish may no longer be the ones targeted, but Australia always has an immigrant whipping boy.”

It is certainly the case that the current Australian government’s treatment of asylum seekers renders dispossession and the treatment of immigrants important and topical. But it is also interesting that the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, in a discussion of Chicago and Brisbane, Lee and Carey, can slide so easily from a definition of difference which circulates around race – around African-American–white-American relations – to a definition which circulates primarily around ‘ethnic’ differences within identities implicitly white. This might be seen as symptomatic of current Australian politics and media in which Aboriginal issues have sometimes been sidelined by the so-called immigration debate, though it is also the case, as Aileen Moreton–Robinson points out, that in Australia “difference” is managed by “incorporat[ing] all ‘Others’ into a homogenous sameness.” This is despite the fact that the understanding and treatment of Aboriginal people, and of immigrants and asylum seekers in Australia, though different, have their foundations in the same collection of racial and ethnic attitudes, the “structural advantage, of race privilege [the] ‘standpoint’ from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society [using] a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed,” as Ruth Frankenburg describes whiteness.

There has been substantial debate recently about the uses and usefulness of historical fiction. Despite this controversy, Australian historical novels such as Carey’s True History continue to sell well locally and internationally. In Australia, a great many of the recent historical fictions are engaged in ‘dealing with’ or revisiting – often in an uncanny, repetitive, return-of-the-repressed manner – Australia’s abysmal history of race relations and the dispossession

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of Aboriginal peoples. Some of the recent women’s historical novels, and many of the women’s nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century examples, are more preoccupied with private, if not domestic, emotional and collective or familial narratives around this history, in terms of their treatment if not their subject-matter. I would argue that a number of recent novels, mostly by white Australian men, fall into a particular subset of this ‘revisiting’ genre, which I would classify as the Search for the White Male Heterosexual Hero.

One of the most important white male heroes who recurs in Australian fiction, and the one I will take as representative here, is Ned Kelly, executed bushranger. Kelly particularly populates the fiction and imagination of the later twentieth century and into the twenty-first, though he features in earlier texts as well. As a choice for a representative national heroic figure, Kelly does not, initially, seem especially promising. Although adopted as a local Australian hero, he is identified strongly – in history and fiction – as ‘Other’ to a mainstream English, middle-class, Anglican society and culture. Kelly was Australian-born but of Irish extraction, and was frequently identified as Irish. He was also of convict descent, Catholic, and working-class. His sexuality has likewise been identified as ambiguous, most notably in an argument in the late 1960s conducted between the linguist Sidney J. Baker and the artist Norman Lindsay. Baker identified Kelly and his gang as homosexual because they wore perfume, sometimes dressed as women, danced with men, and embraced. Lindsay disputed this, arguing that his own father used perfume, and men danced with each other in those days because sometimes women were “not to be had,” though Lindsay seemed to have missed the implications of

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10 For instance, in the figure of Kate Keely in Millie Finkelstein’s *The Newest Woman: The Destined Monarch of the World* (Melbourne: Sportsman, 1895).
this statement. Ian Jones likewise identifies early suggestions that Kelly was a “sodomite.”\(^\text{11}\)

Kelly is a figure who might be classed as a failure. Edward Kelly was hanged, aged 25, in 1880, after a brief life as a bushranger and attempts, mainly unsuccessful, at small farming. He was captured, and his gang, consisting of his brother Dan, and cohorts Joe Byrne and Steve Hart, were killed, in a stand-off at Glenrowan, Victoria, a town that is now centre of the region marketed as “Kelly Country.” Of course, failure is often a ticket to success in Australian society – the most-remembered explorers, for instance, apart from the lost Ludwig Leichhardt, are Burke and Wills, who distinguished themselves as strikingly incompetent explorers.\(^\text{12}\) Shot or executed bushrangers are also popular. Ann Curthoys refers to these sorts of Australian story as “victimological narratives”; there is a special charge associated with the status of victim in Australian historical consciousness, and it is notable how good non-Aboriginal Australians are at memorialising their own sufferings. Looked at more closely, the contest over the past is perhaps not between positive and negative versions, but between those which place white Australians as victims, struggling heroically against adversity, and those which place them as aggressors, bringing adversity upon others.\(^\text{13}\)

Less obviously, because so naturalized by contemporary culture, Kelly possesses two features repeatedly demonstrated as absolutely central to the production of Australian heroism: whiteness and maleness.\(^\text{14}\) The cultural

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circulation of Kelly that I am discussing displays this at the same time as it reveals the tenuousness of these constructs. Perhaps this fragility is most evident in repeated fictional re-inscriptions of his heterosexuality. In the fictionalization and other memorializations of Kelly, the anxiety about his sexuality and the assertions of his heterosexuality are evident in the cultural investment in his physical body. Kelly is an excessively (re-)embodied and fabricated figure, memorialized and represented primarily through material objects: his body, or physical extensions of it, have become not just metonymic of him, but have taken his place. This is particularly true of the famous home-made armour used in the stand-off at Glenrowan and featured prominently at the start of Carey’s novel. Carey reproduces and plays around with this:

the creature appeared from behind police lines. It was nothing human, that much was evident. It had no head but a very long thick neck and an immense chest and it walked with a slow ungainly gait directly into a hail of bullets.

This Kelly is almost hyperreal – made up of fetishized extensions and representations, particularly ones connected with the physical – his much-disputed skull, his authentic and inauthentic portraits, his death mask, and the armour. Even in earlier fictional figurations of Kelly, the bushranger is an extraordinarily physical figure. The 1895 dystopia The Newest Woman by Millie Finkelstein reverses most gender roles in a projected 1950s Australia. In this novel Kelly is represented by the notorious female bushranger Kate Keely, who is presented in a way more familiar for heroines, or anti-heroines, as a body:

she was tall, slenderly built, and of somewhat girlish appearance, remarkably good looking, with dark piercing eyes […]. She was an accomplished horsewoman and sat her steed with a grace and elegance that would have put many a circus rider to the blush. Her costume was neatness itself, and consisted of a superbly fitting black cloth coat, resembling more the regulation claw-hammer than anything else. A prettily arranged white cravat encased the neck, while the white riding pants, tight fitting, finished up in a pair of dainty,


\(^{15}\) Pace Graham Huggan’s conclusions in “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction: The Uses and Abuses of Ned Kelly,” Australian Literary Studies 20.3 (2002): 153, I would argue that even the recent Drewe and Carey fictionalizations of Kelly are celebratory memorializations.

\(^{16}\) And in reviews – for example, Andreas Gaile, “The True History of the Kelly Gang, at Last!” Meanjin 60.3 (2001): 214–19.

\(^{17}\) Peter Carey, True History of the Kelly Gang (2000; St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2001): 1. Further page references are in the main text.
toy-looking, riding boots. A small black hat, conical shaped, tilted on to the back of the head, her black curly hair peeping out over her forehead from under the rim of her hat, and again hanging in the most admired disorder loosely down her back. [...] slung carelessly on her shoulder was a small leather bag, such as schoolboys use, a couple of revolvers adorned her waist, whilst in her left hand she carried a dainty little rifle, more like a child’s play-thing than anything else. [...] What Dare Devil Dolly looked like, and what Dare Devil Dolly was, so were the rest of the gang.18

The spectacular Kate Keely, under another name, also rides the successful horse in the Melbourne Cup in Finkelstein Finkelstein)’s novel, perhaps in tribute to the specular coincidence that in the week between Ned Kelly’s death sentence being pronounced and carried out, a horse called Grand Flâneur won the Melbourne Cup.19 Graham Huggan, in his discussion of Carey’s novel, stresses the violent embodiment of Ned Kelly, and sees this as part of the “commodified discourse” of the novel, suggesting that the fights over body parts in the novel deliberately mirror the fights over the rights to competing versions of the Kelly story and rights to authenticity.20 I would argue that Huggan reads this embodiment, but also reiterates it. Kelly, he says, is “predestined to become the pathological host for malevolent ancestral forces which, nourishing themselves on his body, slowly destroy it from within.”21

Huggan sees the dismemberment found in Carey and in Robert Drewe’s novel about Kelly, Our Sunshine, as resonating with the scattered armour. Recently the State Library of Victoria and the Old Melbourne Gaol have swapped their mismatched bits of armour from the Kelly gang in order to try and reconstitute Ned’s whole suit – to re-member Ned. Arguments continue about the whereabouts of Kelly’s missing skull. Kelly was decapitated after hanging, his brain removed, and his skull examined by a phrenologist. The skull was allegedly then used as a paperweight by the Victorian police; later a skull identified as Kelly’s was put on display in the Old Melbourne Gaol. It was stolen from there in 1978. A Western Australian farmer now claims to have Kelly’s skull concealed on his property in the Kimberleys. The farmer says he will return the skull if DNA tests on relatives’ descendants, or a “facio-cranial reconstruction,” prove it to be Kelly’s.22

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21 “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction,” 148.
In June 2002 Christie’s auction house was forced to settle with a disappointed buyer who had paid over $19,000 for a photograph of Ned Kelly which turned out to be of someone else. The inauthenticity of the photograph had been belatedly established by comparison with a piece of more embodied evidence: Ned Kelly’s death mask. This ‘embodiment’ or desire for the body is not simple – as Huggan’s metaphor implies, the material bits of Kelly are embodied and disembodied, metonymic, empty signifiers and over-stuffed ones. Nolan’s famous images of ‘Kelly’ produce the armour as empty container for a landscape of national identity but also as the vessel of a confronting returned gaze, perhaps more congruent with Carey and Drewe. This is a set of figurations reiterated across popular culture. Kelly, as is well known, was the topic of the first Australian feature-length film, and the stress on his material visual traces is surely connected to his afterlife in film and the extensive contemporary visual documentation of his exploits in photographs and newspaper engravings. Most famously, the body of Joe Byrne was propped up and photographed as if it was alive – a faked and posed visual production of the body, which features as the ultimate trauma in Jean Bedford’s novel *Sister Kate*. Photographs were taken of the stand-off at Glenrowan by photographers who were brought on the special police train with the press. The most enduring visual image of Kelly is probably that in Nolan’s series of Kelly paintings. The display of these in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994 supposedly constituted the original impetus for Carey’s novel. There were also travelling photographic exhibitions and shows. These photos are described almost obsessively in a sequence of novels, particularly in *Sister Kate* and Grenville’s *Joan Makes History*. In the twentieth century, Kelly has been embodied via a sequence of official male outcast hunks – most notably Mick Jagger. Heath Ledger (previously seen as a would-be knight in shining armour) is the star of the 2003 Hollywood version based on Drewe’s novel.

Carey’s novel plays with and contributes to this over-investment in the material traces or holy relics of Kelly by producing a version of the authentic ‘voice’ using the extant “Jerilderie Letter,” and then presenting itself as an(other) original and authentic manuscript, held in the “Melbourne Public

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23 As in Sidney Nolan’s 1946 “Kelly” (riapol on strawboard, 63.5 x 76.1 cm), in which the helmet shows only a gap, like a window onto the landscape beyond.
24 As in Sidney Nolan’s 1947 “Stringybark Creek” (enamel on composition board, 91 x 121.5 cm), in which the eyes look out of the mask.
27 See Dunstan, *Saint Ned*. 
Library.” The physical nature and appearance of each part of the narrative is described in the terms used by the sellers of rare books – for instance:

**Parcel 1 […]** National Bank letterhead. Almost certainly taken from the Euroa Branch of the National Bank in December 1878. There are 45 sheets of medium stock (8” x 10” approx.) with stabholes near the top where at one time they were crudely bound. Heavily soiled. (3)

This conceit draws on one of the longest traditions of fictional presentation. It, too, has to be read as a commentary on the commodification of Kelly and the search for the authentic Kelly. But I would argue that the separation between the critique of commodification and enthusiastic contribution to it is muddier than Huggan suggests. The Kelly narrative (and the non-existence of a Melbourne Public Library) may be familiar to Australian readers – that is, they may have a notion of the ‘authentic’ against which to judge this re-presentation. But this version of Ned, by the New York-based, international prize-winning Carey, is not packaged primarily for the Australian market. At least one international reviewer gave credence to the Melbourne Public Library story.28

**Whiteness and Masculinity**

In Carey, as in Robert Drewe’s *Our Sunshine* and many other figurations, Kelly fiction is depicted as a hero marginal to or in opposition to conservative mainstream society. On some levels this is clearly true of the ‘original’ Kelly, but its fictional reiterations can be seen as actually masking his centrality to the interests of the dominant ideology in celebrating particular forms of masculinity and whiteness. Kelly’s ‘whiteness’ is historically far more questionable and tenuous than it appears in Carey’s novel, and might be seen as progressively manufactured. A Police Gazette of 2 May 1870 describes Kelly as having “the appearance of a half-caste.” His former bushranging mentor, Harry Power, still believing that it may have been Ned who “sold” him, remarked “They say that he or one of the Quinns was dressed up as a blacktracker to deceive me.”29 In *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev maps the way in which the Irish in America gradually positioned themselves on the oppressor’s side of a social system based on ‘colour’.30 There are sufficient similarities in Australia,

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where the Irish were also identified as “a race, distinctly inferior, morally, socially, and intellectually, to Englishmen.” A.M. Topp further declared that “our only hope is to destroy the power of this organization and assimilate this alien race.”

It seems possible, then, that in the 1880s the Catholic working-class criminal Ned Kelly was more Irish than white. Arguably, Kelly has been carried into whiteness with the rest of Irish-Catholic Australia and, via his progressive adoption as anti-authoritarian resistance fighter, by a broader segment of Australian society. However, the nineteenth-century Australian anti-Irish arguments about inferior racial type, backward religion, and the need for assimilation reveal the interconnectedness of the racist discourses about Aborigines and the Irish, and suggest one reason for the use of Kelly in later Aboriginal narratives.

Deborah Bird Rose discusses the way in which Kelly has been refigured otherwise than as “white male hero” in some Yarralin Dreaming stories of the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory – as a dreaming figure, aligned with Aborigines in terms of his positioning as a “moral European” and even, according to Rose, “indigenised.”

Rose’s interpretation of the story sees the use of Kelly as being based on the oppositional status he carries in contemporary culture. This status is then used in a narrative that aligns Kelly with proper behaviour:

Captain Cook [in other stories and by extension this one] is the originator of an immoral process by which peoples’ land was stolen, their labour appropriated, their lives extinguished, and their knowledge of the truth denied. Hobbles [Danayari] always states that Captain Cook is dead now; he is dead, and his immoral law ought to have died with him. In contrast, Ned Kelly was opposed to what Captain Cook and his mob were doing to Australia. He went to England – the place of origin of alien animals, alien laws, and intruders. There he was killed, and there, apparently, he rose up to the sky. [Rose suggests] that this sequence is meant to indicate that England is being brought into the same universe of moral principles as Australia. England, or English people, cannot claim that Ned Kelly has nothing to do with them. […]

Aboriginal people in the Victoria River District […] in indigenising [Kelly], […] have declared him to be not truly other, but truly us. In fact, Yarralin people take it further. Through Ned Kelly an equitable social order is established as an enduring principle of life.

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33 Rose, “Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins,” 182.
Rose sees these narratives as a challenge which may not have been taken up. Certainly Carey’s Kelly is much more about the white wild colonial boy than it is Rose’s figure of proper behaviour. Carey’s masculine Australianness is reified through opposition to England and Anglo-Australia, and through attachment to its unique non-urban landscape. But this is really more congruent with the white national identity of Russel Ward’s “Australian legend” than the kind of radical refiguring suggested by Rose. That neither Carey nor even Drewe fully takes up the possibilities for a more racially complex depiction of Kelly is indicated by the fact that neither makes use of stories about Kelly learning skills from the Aboriginal people around Avenel in his youth. In Drewe, Aborigines are in a sentence sandwiched between the Chinese and lunatics, “Flickering around the edges, shy Aborigines.” Both of the main sources Carey cites, Jones and Molony, refer to these tales. In Carey, Aborigines feature, in victimological style, only as trackers, some sympathetic, mostly otherwise; the pursuers, not the pursued.34

In his discussion of cultural memory, Graham Huggan sees the narrative of white folk history about Ned Kelly as harbouring dangerously conservative potential. He suggests that for increasing numbers of Australians the Kelly national narrative is “embarrassingly exclusive” and that “the history of Aboriginal genocide and dispossession […] now constitutes the most significant form of memory work being undertaken in postcolonial Australia.”35 It is odd, then, that he sees Drewe’s and Carey’s fictions, rather than the Aboriginal uses of Kelly, as those most likely to resist and undo the romantic, ‘celticizing’, exclusionary tendencies of the white myth of Kelly.

In contrast to the traditional folk narrative, Huggan reads Drewe’s and Carey’s versions of Kelly as texts which “imaginatively reassess” the “status of the national icon,” texts “in which the romantic impulse toward anti-imperial nostalgia is comprehensively debunked.” I would like to believe this optimistic vision of a “transformative cultural memory.”36 However, I fear this is produced by glossing over the abiding presence of undeconstructed romantic mythology, in Carey at least, and worse perhaps: the reinvigoration of Kelly as a hero still ‘oppositional’ enough to legitimate the celebration of the masculinity, whiteness and heterosexuality of an endangered masculine national self.

One site where this might be seen is in the uses of that other sort of romance in these fictionalizations. Kelly’s story is a story of homosocial, even

35 Huggan, “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction,” 149.
36 “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction,” 153.
homo-erotic, bonding – mostly fictionalized as Kelly-and-his-boys-against-the-hostile-establishment. Both Drewe and Carey are careful to recuperate Kelly for the cause of a heterosexual masculinity by displacing homo-erotic bondings with hetero ones. In both novels, Ellen Kelly features as the primary object of desire: phallic mother, Mother Ireland, Mother Australia, earth-mother.37 In both, this uncomfortable relationship is modified by the introduction of a female sexual partner, and in Carey this heteronormativity is cemented by the inclusion of Kelly’s daughter.38

**Popular Heroes**

In a recent discussion of the canon of Australian literature, Ken Gelder sees “Aust. Lit.” as a category produced through identification with a high-art ‘literature’ rather than popular fiction, with a particular understanding of local which devalues and ‘others’ the transnational and more broadly regional understandings of cultural production.39 One of the interesting things about the trajectory of Kelly as literary subject is that he traverses these fields chronologically. That is, he starts off being represented in the realm Gelder identifies as popular fiction – in the early popular ballad, poetry, and more recent such works – before incorporation into the more canonical via Robert Drewe’s *Our Sunshine* and Peter Carey’s *True History*.40 In this sense, Kelly might be seen as having been appropriated to the literary canon from the popular, in terms of his literary and cultural representations, and his otherness self-samed (or the self-sameness of his othering foregrounded) in the interests of an ostensibly inclusive nationalizing narrative.

The shift from nineteenth-century fictionalizations of heroic explorer figures such as Ludwig Leichhardt to fictionalizations of Kelly (to the very limited extent that they can be seen as sequential) could be seen as a shift away from imperial spatiality resting on the disembodiment and generalizing of the heroic figure in a narrative of possession that guarantees ‘our’ right.

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37 In Drewe, mother, or lover, or both, feature as “round and brown” breasts he nuzzles (*Our Sunshine*, 39).
This gradually yields to ‘victimological narrative’, with Ned Kelly as the white male hero of an acceptable alterity. Is Kelly’s Irishness a kind of ‘white’ blackness, transformable into whiteness? I would suggest that Kelly is a figure who can still be made ‘Other’ to Australian identity, hence innocent of Australian transgressions against the land and the property of Aborigines. He is, in fact, a punisher of the white establishment, but recuperable to one strand of that establishment. He is a physicalized figure, in that he represents the otherness associated with the body in the Cartesian divide – criminality, blackness, working-classness, Catholicism, femininity. All of this materiality is mobilized by the body, but also somehow dissociated in the narratives.

One of the most disturbing aspects of Carey’s *True History*, for me, is its use of literal and figurative cross-dressing. In the novel, Kelly discovers that his father has been spotted wearing a woman’s dress. Ned is horrified, and digs up this repressed signifier in order to burn it. He encounters other face-blackened, dress-wearing men, including his brother Dan, through the course of the action. Eventually, his heterosexual love interest, the Irish-Catholic, Ellen-Kellyesque Mary, mother of his daughter, enlightens him about the meaning of the cross-dressing. It is identified as the sign not of gender uncertainty or homosexuality but as the insignia of a vicious Irish rebel group, the “Sons of Sieve” (292). The only secret history being unearthed here, Graham Huggan tells us comfortingly, is one about the “superimposition of Irish folk memory onto recent Australian colonial history.” The dress worn by Kelly’s father is “a sign not of his ‘effeminacy’ but, on the contrary, of his membership of a secret society of Irish rebels.” Huggan does not mention the blackface.

It is nice to be able to locate the member in the dress, but surely the cross-dressing in the novel is not only a sign of something else – particularly in a novel that plays around with dress-ups so much. Kelly is full of homophobic horror at the appearance of the dress, and the dressed bodies (15, 23). At one point he attempts to return the dresses worn by gang members to the woman from whom they were stolen, but he ends up using them as gifts for proper recipients, a pair of female prostitutes. One of the dresses worn by his brother then ends up on the woman who looks like his mother, whom Kelly falls in love with and fathers a child on. Carey takes the dress-imagery further in the description of the manufacture of the armour. He has Kelly inspired by the Civil War ships the *Virginia* and the *Monitor*; “this is what them Mollys

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41 See Randolph Stow, *Midnite* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1967), for a commentary on the uses of white heroes such as Kelly, and on cross-dressing.
42 Huggan, “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction,” 147.
43 “Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction,” 146.
should of worn yes this were the very seamstress he needed for his dresses,” he says to Steve Hart (345). When he comes to make the armour, he “ma[kes] the templates for the 1st ironclad suit [and] use[s] fresh peeled stringybark just as women use the paper for a dress” (347).

One of the influences on this novel is clearly Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1903). The bush language and description reproduced, the use of elided swearing, even the details of the textual material – the National Bank paper versus Tom Collins’s Letts’ Pocket diaries, for instance – are reminiscent of Furphy. *Such is Life* is full of cross-dressing women. In Furphy this is indicative of boundary anxiety, which incorporates geographical, physical and metaphysical boundaries as well as the boundaries of gender. The cross-dressing women could also conceivably be read as rebels against a gender economy which renders them entirely read, and readable, as bodies. Carey’s inversion of the cross-dressing – men to women instead of women to men – seems some sort of response to this.

I think the real fear here, convoluted as it may sound, is the threat to the national subject represented by the iconic national subject (Huggan is right); Carey and Drewe play with, ironize, question and deconstruct the figure of Ned as national hero in all sorts of ways, but as part of this they stabilize aspects of his identity that are actually much more fluid in earlier incarnations – his shifting and uncertain sexuality, for instance.

Linzi Murrie argues that the masculinity of the Australian legend is set up with the dominant social order, not women, as its Other. This brings us back, in part, to the address of Carey’s novel to Kelly’s infant daughter. This is both inclusive and exclusive of the feminine – entirely addressed to a woman, who, as in Gayatri Spivak’s famous reading of *Frankenstein* as an imperial text, never answers back, and might therefore be seen as somehow outside of the prescriptive definitions of a mythic masculine national subject. But she is also excluded – reader, not actor, in the events, constitutive proof of the protagonist’s masculinity without any subjectivity of her own.

Although, of course, women feature in male homosociality as items of exchange and as proof of a masculinity actually validated by other men within the homosocial bonds, this does not fully account for Ned’s girlfriend, Mary, in *True History*. She features as the vessel for desire and competition between

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44 Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life* (Sydney: Bulletin, 1903).
46 Murrie, “The Australian Legend.”
Constable Fitzpatrick and Ned, but she is also the authorizing voice in the allaying of Ned’s fears about the sexuality of his father, brothers and, by extension, himself, in her proper location of the meaning of men-in-dresses. As proper woman-in-dress she is able to identify the men-in-dresses, the Sons of Sieve, as both appropriately masculine (using their wives’ dresses, masculine in their cruelty and their homosocial bonds) and inappropriately masculine (too cruel, because cruel against horses, not men; misguided in their target). Kelly’s release from the fear of this dress enables the forging of a different masculine national dress – the armour. While representing a break from the now ‘foreign’ national movement of Irish rebellion, the pregnant Mary also legitimates Ned in terms of a model of paternal masculinity.

For me there is some sort of sleight of hand operating in Carey’s novel, in which the blackness of Irish Kelly, which is only a trace, is both incorporated in and simultaneously washed off the body, as the boys launder their dresses. By overshadowing, or perhaps investing, cross-racial possibility with a gender and sexual uncertainty which is not written on the body, which can be ripped off like a dress, the promise of blackness is incorporated and the fear of blackness is dispelled. In sequence, then: once racial uncertainty has been obscured by sexual uncertainty, this too can be whisked off like the dress and replaced with a national uncertainty – are the Sons of Sieve Irish rebel heroes, or cowardly bullies whose practices should have been left behind? Even this uncertainty is dispelled and displaced by the replacement of these ‘sissy’ Old-Country dresses with the new ‘dresses’ – the over-invested custom-made garments of Australian nationalism, the Kelly armour, forged out of donated ploughs.48

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A Wildly Distorted Account?

Peter Carey’s 30 Days in Sydney

ANTHONY J. HASSALL

We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.1

I wanted the idea that there was a true story and that the writer would finally not tell the true story.2

Lying Like the Truth?

In the second paragraph of Illywhacker Peter Carey’s narrator warns the reader: “I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar. I say that early to set things straight. Caveat emptor.”3 In thus “setting things straight,” Herbert Badgery confronts his readers with the Liar Paradox: it is impossible to determine whether he is lying or telling the truth when he says he is a liar, hence to know what veracity, if any, to attribute to his narration. The warning also suggests that, despite the postmodern distrust of such concepts, he believes that his stories may be either true or false.4

4 For a more detailed discussion of this narratorial strategy, see Anthony J. Hassall, Dancing on Hot Macadam: Peter Carey’s Fiction (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 3rd
In conspicuous contrast to this up-front confession of falsehood, one of Carey’s more recent novels is titled *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and its narrator begins by insisting on his veracity:

I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false.5

Ned’s ‘true history’ takes the form of a cache of documents which constitute his *apologia*. The fact that other Kelly (hi)stories, of which there are many, have raked over the surviving records for a hundred and twenty years without discovering these documents, or any daughter of Ned’s, renders such a ‘discovery’ intriguing but implausible, and predisposes readers familiar with the Kelly story (and who, in Australia at least, is not?) to view the *True History* as fiction not fact, albeit fiction derived from the historical record (ie, based on a ‘true story’).6

Does it matter if Carey is lying when he has ‘Ned’ protest his veracity? Even supposedly factual histories are inherently partial and partisan, privileging some events over others and interpreting them in the light of their authors’ disparate ideologies. Historians may strive to be objective, ‘Ned Kelly’ may be passionately determined to tell the truth, and Herbert Badgery may be a self-confessed liar, but in the end they all tell stories, and their readers are left to judge as best they can whether those stories are more concerned with the facts of history or with the insightful (un)truths of art.

The subtitle immediately positions Carey’s *30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account* within this dialogue between truth and lies, histories and fictions, which runs as a theme throughout his writing, including his most recent novel *My Life as a Fake* (2003).7 The blurb of *30 Days in Sydney* locates it in “an occasional series in which some of the finest writers of our time reveal the secrets of the city they know best,” thereby suggesting that this book will be situated towards the factual end of that scale. If so, this would be a new departure for Carey, who for two decades has published only

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7 Cf Lyn Jacobs’ comment that “Investigating the distance between fact and fiction, history and truth, has long been an authorial preoccupation”; review of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, *JASAL* 1 (2002): 96.
fiction, albeit much of it quasi-historical. But if this book is a celebrity travel
guide, how and why would it be “wildly distorted”? In such a genre we might
expect Carey’s Sydney to be personal, selective, impressionistic and even nar-
rativized; but hardly like Saarlim, the wildly distorted version of New York
City in The Unusual Life of Tristram Smith. In this context, what sort of
come-on – or disclaimer – is “wildly distorted”? Is it a challenge to those
familiar with the city to recognize the distortions, and to judge whether they
enhance or obscure the portrait? An exercise in satiric defamiliarization? A
nod in the direction of fashionable postmodern self-consciousness? Or simply
another work of fiction?

Nightmare City

A bookshop browser bemused by the apparent quarrel between the book’s
main title, which suggests an anecdotal memoir, its subtitle, which suggests a
fantastical fiction, and the jacket blurb, which suggests a visitor’s guide,
might be drawn to examine the book’s paratext more closely for further clues
to its genre. The hardback format is plain and small. Its identical dust-jacket
and cover illustrations feature the cliché tourist icon of the Sydney Opera
House framed by the arch of the Harbour Bridge, but in a night-time photo-
graph in which the sky and the water are dark, and the muted lighting and the
limited colouring so grim as to verge on the apocalyptic. The camera, we are
told, does not lie, and the use of a photograph suggests that some degree of
(photo)realism will follow, but the sepia tones also suggest a threatening, film
noir dreamscape in which daytime reality is distorted by nighttime fears, re-
minding readers familiar with Carey of his many nightmarish settings, such as
the bleak and sleazy Sydney of The Tax Inspector. This is no Lonely Planet
Guide, no coffee-table photo album: the paper is not glossy, and no photo-
graphs or graphic reconstructions entice potential tourists – just a crude black
and white sketch of Sydney and its waterways on the endpapers. All in all, it
is an enigmatic mixture of signals. And where would prospective buyers find
it in the bookshop – travel, non-fiction or fiction? Presumably, given Carey’s
celebrity as a novelist, alongside his novels, which is where Carey, who has
emphasized its fictional dimension, has said he would place it.8

8 Responding to a question about whether he and his publishers saw the book as
‘travel’ or ‘fiction’, Carey replied: “I don’t see it as any genre in particular. It is fiction.
It is a sort of memoir. It is about travel, but then so is all fiction in one way or another.
It is also about home, whatever that is. This question of genre is one the booksellers
have to make, God help them. If it was my choice, I’d place it right next to the novels.”
Carey also stated that he “had nothing to do with any of it [the book’s design], par-
ticularly the inaccurate map” (email to the author, 5 June 2003).
Mates

As the reader opens the volume, the confounding of fact and fiction continues. The book’s dedication to “Kelvin, Lester, Sheridan, Marty, Jack and Geordie” announces – within inverted commas – that the dedicatees have been disguised by the author: “I had to rearrange their faces and give them all another name.” Presumably they at least know who they are – if they exist outside the text. If they do, why was a fictional disguise necessary? We are later told that the architect “Jack Ledoux” had objected to the use of one of his houses in an earlier Carey book – perhaps Jack Catchprice’s domicile in *The Tax Inspector* – and he may therefore be disguised at his own request in *30 Days in Sydney*. But if Jack Ledoux has been fictionalized, has his story, the climax of the book, also been altered? Is it completely invented, or merely reworked into a satisfying climax to the narrative? And how fictionalized are the “Peter” who narrates the book and his version of his visit to Sydney? Should we accept the invitation of the subtitle to pursue these enquiries, or should we take Herbert Badgery’s advice in *Illywhacker* “to not waste your time with your red pen, to try to pull apart the strands of lies and truth, but to relax and enjoy the show”?9 Responding to questions like these, Carey “cheerfully admits much of the book is fiction, particularly the colourful ‘friends’ who regale him with their Sydney stories”; but he does not indicate precisely what kind of distortion the reader can expect to encounter: “It’s all made up […]. That’s what I do […]. My friends have lives and businesses […]. So it wasn’t quite right (to make them identifiable).”10

One difficulty with accepting Herbert Badgery’s advice simply to relax and enjoy the show is that even an audience willing to suspend disbelief wants to know what sort of show it is about to watch, and this book’s self-positioning paratext appears to be contradictory. Are we about to read a travel guide or a personal memoir, or a cultural analysis, or a generically transgressive combination of all three? Readers who decide to accept the challenge, to pay their money and see the show, find themselves treated to an array of performances. The narrator/ringmaster, the revenant ‘Peter Carey’, describes his visit to Sydney in April 2000 to write a book that reveals the city’s secrets. As part of this project he has asked his friends in advance to select stories that epitomize the unique character of Sydney, and these are interspersed like circus acts throughout the framing narrative. In what follows, I will discuss two episodes from the frame story, and two of the embedded stories, with a view to determining just what kind of narrative Carey has produced, and whether its

promised distortions are fictional means to the factual end of exposing the underlying nature of the city.

**DNA**

The first of the book’s twenty-six chapters acts as an overture to the book as a whole. It begins with the narrator arriving at Sydney Airport from his current home in New York City, and is punctuated by musings prompted by his return to his former home. A quotation from Anthony Trollope on the unrivalled beauty of Sydney Harbour is followed by a recollection of the narrator’s first arrival in Sydney, “that vulgar crooked convict town” (2), seventeen years earlier (not the twenty-seven named in the text – or is he lying about his age, like Herbert Badgery?). This is followed by a reflection on the powerful influence of the city’s sandstone “DNA” on its inhabitants, and a strong invocation of its racial history:

> If you come from New York City all you may notice is the apparent easiness of life, the lightness, the sense of a population forever on holiday. But there was a bitter war fought here upon and about this earth. The Eora tribe, who still thought of Sydney as their country, were given smallpox and fell like flies. Convicts raped Eora women. Eora men trapped and murdered convicts. Two hundred years later the past continues to insist itself upon the present in ways that are dazzlingly and almost unbelievably clear.\(^{11}\)

As this passage foreshadows, the narrator employs a long historical perspective as he probes the city for its secrets. The Aboriginal occupation of the site, and their firestick-farming of it, figure large in his account, as do the early years of European occupation, with contemporary sources like Watkin Tench and Governor Arthur Phillip drawn on extensively. The narrator is clearly determined to assert the persistence of this past into the present, and to search out the historical factors, geographical and human, that have determined the city’s character.

**The Convict Stain?**

He is startled out of these private reflections by the first words he says he hears on Australian soil, “Customer O’Brien, Customer Figgis, please present yourselves at the podium inside the terminal.” The narrator detects a revealing

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significance in what he perceives as the uncouth tone of this announcement: it “contains the secrets of our history […] the discourse of a nation which began its life without a bourgeoisie, whose first citizens learned the polite mode of conversation from police reports” (7). While he later concedes that it is “unfair” of him to object so strongly to the word “customer,” he nonetheless argues that its use exposes “the convict stain” (emphasis in original) that marked the language of the first European citizens of Sydney:

Deep in the secret heart of Sydney […] beneath the brashness and the pride and the boasting, is a memory of human suffering, and a resentment of those who caused it.

The past in Sydney is like this, both celebrated and denied, buried yet everywhere in evidence as in this Exhibit A, this irritating honorific Customer, which I set before Your Honour as, on this clear blue-skied morning, I come to claim a home. (9)12

I find this reading strained. I wonder whether any other passenger at Sydney Airport that morning found the language unusual, or saw in it evidence of Sydney’s convict-stained past. Is the use of the term “customer,” then, or its interpretation, one of Carey’s wild distortions?13 The alleged “brashness and […] pride and […] boasting” sounds closer to American than Australian stereotypes, particularly when compared with the American Gabe Manzini’s very different stereotyping of Efricans [aka Australians] in The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith: “He liked […] their lack of slickness, their sense of privacy, even their disconcerting habit of calling their superiors by their first name. He liked their lack of bullshit, their pragmatism, their sense of realpolitik.”14

Another pointed comparison might be made with the account of a migrating English family’s arrival at Sydney Airport that Phillip Knightley cites as an overture to his Australia: A Biography of a Nation (2000):

We were the last to clear customs […]. The Customs Officer looked at our four children and our huge pile of luggage and asked us if that was all there was. We assured him it was and he said, “Welcome to Australia” and waved us through.

12 In a longish Australian life, I have never encountered reference to “the convict stain” outside nineteenth-century, and then usually Tasmanian, writings. We all know that Tasmania is an island off the mainland which is, and is not, a wildly distorted part of Australia.

13 Having arrived at various Australian airports, including Sydney, over the years, I do not recall hearing the word “customer” on a public address. If it were to be used, would it really be any less neutral than the standard airport term “passenger”?

We were still stunned by this lack of formality when we came out into the arrivals hall. And there was Gough Whitlam, the Prime Minister of Australia, and his wife standing at the front of a large crowd and they all burst out singing *Waltzing Matilda*. What a welcome, we thought. What a country.\(^{15}\)

That was, of course, in 1973, and the Whitlams just happened to be at the airport to film a sequel to *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*;\(^{16}\) but even without that extraordinary coincidence, the family’s first impression of friendly informality is in stark contrast to Carey’s (over-)reading of “customer.” More recently, informal Australian friendliness has been replaced by the rehearsed patter of American shop-assistant must-speak: “Have a nice day.” And since September 11, 2001, airports everywhere have become edgier, more hostile places.

What Carey’s arrival-scene catches precisely, however, is the raw sensitivity of a jet-lagged, sleep-deprived traveller embarrassed by the perceived uncouthness of his native bureaucracy. I remain unconvinced that he identifies something uniquely revealing about Sydney or Australia in this scene, but his claim that the language of Sydney continues to reflect its convict past opens the broader strategy of finding evidence of the pervasive influence of the past on the present. The distortion, if that is what it is, becomes part of his attempt to reveal the underlying truth behind the contemporary appearance.

**CBD**

In the second episode of the narrator’s framing narrative that I want to consider, he contends that the architectural ugliness of the Central Business District of Sydney, which sits astride the Tank Stream and “the birthplace of modern Australia” (89), is a revealing emblem of the city’s continuing moral corruption. He begins Chapter Nine by describing the 1975 panic attack which rendered him unable ever after to drive across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. This leads into a long account of a dream he has on his present return to Sydney, in which he climbs the Harbour Bridge and looks down into the heart of the city:

> And then, in my dream, I peered down from the top arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and had the insight which would never leave me, not even in my waking hours. Asleep in my bed in Woollahra I saw the Central Business District as if for the first time. I saw how it held itself back from the edge of the beloved harbour as if it understood how vile and crooked it had


\(^{16}\) Knightley, *Australia*, 14.
always been. In a society which values the view above all else, here was the heart of the city, a blind place with no vistas, a dense knot of development and politics and business and law. This was Macarthur’s monument. A physical expression of two centuries of Sydney’s own brand of capitalism, the concrete symbol of an unhealthy anti-democratic alliance between business and those authorities which should have controlled it. (92)

He interprets the climax of this dream-sequence, which echoes the *film noir* jacket and cover illustration, and which is situated within the double nightmare of the narrator’s earlier panic attack and his subsequent dream ascent of the Bridge through its contracting steel entrails, as a hyperreal insight into the black heart of the city, which persists from its crude and brutal origins. Because they are distortions of waking perceptions of reality, the unexpected and unsettling insights dreams produce do not always survive into the light of day. In this case, however, the narrator asserts that his dream is the true reality.

It is worth remembering, however, that the ordinary denizens of Sydney cross the Harbour Bridge without panic, and the view those who climb it see from its summit includes the Sydney Opera House, an architectural marvel, as well as the ugly scar of the Cahill Expressway and what I would describe as the characterless highrisers of the CBD. Carey’s vision of the heart of Sydney’s darkness, which recalls the pervasive moral corruption of the city in *The Tax Inspector*, is, then, distorted, and again sounds more stereotypically American than Australian. It is, however, again in keeping with the outsider/insider perspective adopted in the book, and with its determined focusing on the persistence of the past in the present.

The Elements

Embedded in the narrator’s own story of his visit to Sydney are the stories of his Sydney friends. Some of these are self-contained episodes narrated by the characters themselves, and some are worked into the narrator’s tale. The self-contained narratives describe personal experiences of geographical, social and political forces ostensibly unique to the city, and each is aligned, at the narrator’s request, with one or more of the old elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water. Science has moved a long way since these were believed to be the constituent elements of all matter, and their choice seems curiously ahistorical at first, though it is again consistent with the narrator’s method of looking for elemental, not surface, characteristics, and the book eventually makes a case for selecting them as defining influences on the character of Sydney.

While these stories appear to be included in a relatively impromptu manner, it is clear that they have been premeditated by their tellers, and judiciously arranged by the author. Their sequencing, for example, is masterful, bring-
A Wildly Distorted Account?

The extent to which the stories have been invented and/or edited by Carey himself is not, however, clear, and his statement that much of the book was invented and written in New York may or may not apply to these embedded tales. The friends who tell them are unusually wealthy and successful, both for Carey characters (who are typically “poor bloody losers”) and for ‘representative’ Sydneysiders. Kelvin, an ex-hippy millionaire who drives a Jaguar, participates with Lester in the silvertail sport of Sydney–Hobart yacht racing. The otherworldly architect Jack Ledoux says you cannot live in Sydney and not own a boat, which would be news to most of its citizens, especially those in the western suburbs. Even the alcoholic Sheridan, who now lives – highly improbably – in a cave, has been a successful writer. The stories this eccentric group of friends tell do, however, depict distinctively Australian mateship and ingenuity – they confront elemental violence, fight fire, wind and water, and survive the self-inflicted perils of mountain-climbing.

Dawn Service

Vicki’s story differs markedly from those of the narrator’s friends. It is not elicited by his request for a typical Sydney story, though it serves that purpose; nor is it told as a separate, embedded narrative. Instead, it emerges dramatically in the course of events. Unlike the rich male friends who own boats, Vicki is an indigenous woman who drives a tow-truck. Her story brings the treatment of indigenous Australians by the European invaders out of the brutal past and into the ugly present. Tellingly positioned second-last, it offers a heart-wrenching comment on that most sacred of Australian rituals, the Anzac Day Dawn Service, and a pointed and poignant contrast to the white Australian mateship epitomized by the Anzac legend – which is celebrated in the final, climactic story of Jack Ledoux.

Although Vicki figures prominently in the book, no mention of an ‘original’ for her, or indeed any woman, figures in the dedication. Kelvin warns “Peter” about this bias:

Mate, you’re making a big mistake talking to all these men. You’re ignoring the women. Listening to you, it’s as if they don’t exist.

I thought this was pretty rich, coming from a guy who called his female crew members ‘slotted personnel.’

My novels are filled with women, I said.

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But no one reads novels, Peter. The world has changed, in case you haven’t noticed.
Everyone is reading *Vogue* and *Elle*?
You’re going to take a lot of shit for this, he said, and don’t forget I warned you. (75)

Vicki may be included to address this bias, or as a descendant of the indigenous inhabitants who figure so prominently in the book’s account of the formative days of Sydney. She is an improbably devised figure – one has to wonder how many tow-truck drivers in western Sydney are female, indigenous and enthusiastic readers of David Malouf – and she makes her entry in an improbably devised manner. When Sheridan’s 33-year-old Mercedes blows its engine as he and the narrator drive back to Sydney after a night spent in his mountain cave, Vicki is the only tow-truck driver who arrives on the scene. After this chance meeting over his exploded engine, Vicki teams up with Sheridan, and her story emerges in a conversation at the inner-city rooftop squat of his ‘Captain Planet’ son. The narrator is surprised to learn that she is Aboriginal:

I turned, suddenly, to look at Vicki and she caught me and held my gaze. Didn’t figure me for a blackfellow? she said.

No, I didn’t.

But we are everywhere amongst you, she sipped her beer. Reading *books*, driving *tow trucks*.

Come on, said Sheridan, Peter’s cool.

Oh I’m cool too, said Vicki bitterly. I’m a real truck-driving, post-modernist Koori. (215)

One of the Stolen Generation, Vicki tells an all too familiar Australian story:

I’ve got a white mum just like you have. I’ve got a white dad, a real old digger, I marched with him each Anzac Day until he died. But I grew up not knowing I had a black mum and a black dad. I did not even know I was Koori, and now it seems that has to be the only interesting thing about me. (216)

The next morning she attends the Anzac Day Dawn Service with Peter, Sheridan and Fix Neal, and after the ceremony they watch Prime Minister John Howard on television in Gallipoli with the Turkish Prime Minister and thousands of young Australians:

Then I looked at Vicki and saw the tears welling in her eyes, and it was only then I understood the bitter irony of this moment.

Our prime minister could embrace and forgive the people who killed our beloved sons and fathers, and so he should, but he could not, would not,
apologise to the Aboriginal people for 200 years of murder and abuse. The battle against the Turks, he said in Gallipoli, was our history, our tradition. The war against the Aboriginals, he had already said at home, had happened long ago. The battle had made us; the war that won the continent was best forgotten. (227)

In a harrowing climax to the scene, Vicki cuts up her white father’s war ribbons and throws them away. This despairing gesture captures one extreme of the complex of emotions the narrator experiences when he contemplates his native country, in which he finds much to celebrate, and much to deplore.

Southerly Buster

The prize quarry that the narrator has pursued throughout his visit to Sydney is the story of Jack Ledoux’s rescue on Pittwater. His initial attempts to capture this on tape are frustrated by his inability to drive across the Sydney Harbour Bridge to Ledoux’s home, and by his losing his tape-recorder batteries when he does get there. The story is, however, finally recorded on the narrator’s last morning in Sydney. Having heard the story of Vicki and her father’s medals, Ledoux wants to balance that negative image of Sydney with “so much that is wonderful about this town” (232). His story is thus strategically positioned, both by him and by the narrator, at the end of the book, where he tells it without narratorial comment or interruption.

The story, which resonates with the earlier narrative of Lester’s and Kelvin’s experience of the disastrous 1998 Sydney to Hobart yacht race, describes Ledoux’s dramatic rescue during a storm on Pittwater. Sailing his nineteen-foot racing yacht home through a southerly buster, he is swamped by a fierce gust of wind and in grave danger of losing his boat and drowning, when he is rescued at the last moment by a Good Samaritan in a 35-foot motor-boat:

Why? I asked him. Why did you come out here?
I was up in the bloody estuary, he says, and this storm come through and I thought somebody might be in trouble so I come out to take a look. (245)

The laconic rescuer then calls the local water police, who, despite the dangerous conditions, come out promptly and save Ledoux’s boat, which the rescuer has refused to abandon despite police instructions to do so. The final chapter of the story concerns the recovery of the boat’s valuable laminated timber rudder, which has washed ashore near Gosford and been found by a local fisherman who answers an advertisement about it in the local paper:

Describe the rudder to me.
And I did.
Just my luck.
I can’t tell you how grateful I am.
I bet you can’t.
Do you mind if I come and pick it up?
No.
What can I bring you?
A bottle of Inner Circle rum.
So I found a bottle of Inner Circle rum, and went to a warehouse in Gosford where this bloke worked as a storeman and packer.
And he handed over the rudder.
And I paid in the oldest currency of all.
And that’s the end of the story. (248)

Jack Ledoux’s story thus embodies Australian mateship, looking out for other people in trouble and cheerfully taking great personal risks to help them. It echoes earlier stories like Marty’s account of friends and neighbours fighting bushfires, and Sheridan’s tale of the banjo player Skink, who, despite two broken wrists, protects his friend Paul from vengeful police after their car crash. It is positioned to provide an upbeat ending, while the bottle of Inner Circle rum exchanged for the rudder neatly circles back to the currency of old Sydney Town, clinching the book’s case that the city’s origins remain everywhere apparent in the present.

Upbeat though this ending may be, its final exchange nevertheless invokes the corruption of the Rum Corps and its contemporary manifestation in the corruption of Sydney police and politicians. Examples of “the Sydney way of doing Business” (100) in 30 Days in Sydney range from Kevan [sic] Gosper’s daughter carrying the Olympic torch in place of Yianna Souleles, through Geordie Levinson’s story of the collusion between the motor-bike thief Barry Williams, Paddington detectives and the hoi polloi of the eastern suburbs, to Fix Neal’s story about the state Premier and his Attorney-General drinking in a pub after hours and endorsing the publican’s licence to demonstrate their contempt for their own laws:

We all laughed. And this is the thing that I perhaps should not confess – we liked this reckless behaviour. We liked the lawlessness and if we sometimes suspected our leaders were a little criminal then they were our criminals at least.

That’s Sydney, mate, said Fix, that’s Sydney to a fucking tee. It’s a hard place. (200)

The character of Sydney that finally emerges, then, is a mixture of the moral rottenness of its CBD, the brutality of its treatment of its indigenous inhabitants, and the generous mateship of some of its citizens.
The (Un)True Distortions of Art

Peter Carey has been writing distorted versions of the true history of Australia throughout his career. In his early stories, the distortions involved futuristic fantasy and science fiction, to which Bliss added the clever lies of advertising and Illywhacker revisionist versions of the past and elements of magical realism. Oscar and Lucinda and Jack Maggs rewrote received accounts of Australia’s past, as, in a different way, did True History of the Kelly Gang, while The Tax Inspector was a distortion of present-day Sydney. The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith was the wildest distortion of all, which nonetheless bore an uncanny resemblance to the neocolonial relationship between Australia and America. As Herbert Badgery warned, and as the subtitle of 30 Days in Sydney reminds us, these are all ‘lies’ that veer off at tangents from quotidian versions of fact and history, though they never seek to sever entirely a metaphoric relationship with that origin, and indeed return to illuminate it. At the same time, these revisionist (hi)stories are beautifully crafted fictions which show us fully human characters inhabiting the empty masks of received Australian history and mythology.

Picasso said: “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.”¹⁹ But if this paradox is true, what is the best way for a novelist to negotiate it? Is it by confessing up-front to lying, like Herbert Badgery; or is it by pretending to tell the truth, like ‘Ned Kelly’? One clue to Carey’s take on this complex negotiation may lie in his portrayal of Charles Dickens via the novelist Tobias Oates in Jack Maggs. Oates lies to Jack about the mesmerism sessions in which he steals Jack’s story, then refracts that story through the distorting lens of his personal disappointments to create, years later, his classic novel The Death of Maggs (a take on Great Expectations). Jack Maggs purports to expose Oates’s lies and to correct his distortions, leaving the readers finally to determine their own perceptions of the truths and lies in Great Expectations and Jack Maggs.

Unlike many of his fellow novelists, Carey has in the past eschewed reviewing and literary journalism. At first sight, 30 Days in Sydney might seem to depart from this dedicated practice, but in fact it is consistent both with his career-long preoccupation with re-telling aspects of Australia’s story and with his practice of doing so via distortions which defamiliarize his subjects, thereby enabling his readers to see them free of those other distortions naturalized by habit and convention. What appears to begin as factual celebrity

¹⁹ Picasso, Art, 21.
travel-writing thus turns into a collection of stories, of fictions, of beautiful lies, which capture more searchingly than a merely factual travelogue the look, the feel, the history and the spirit of Sydney, that metonym for Australia. Wildly distorted? Yes, in a sense: the sense of art, and of all of Carey’s fictions, that, as Picasso says, aim to make us realize the truth.20

Critiques of Australia by long-term expatriates who have achieved celebrity status abroad like Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer, Clive James, Peter Conrad and Robert Hughes constitute a distinctive sub-genre of Australian cultural studies. The revenant expatriate, seeing the once-familiar with the eyes of one long absent, ministers to a number of needs: the craving for a distinctively Australian identity; reassurance that Australia is no longer the cultural backwater they fled; confirmation that Australians can succeed in the wider world; and proof of the self-confidence of current Australians who can take the criticism handed out by expatriates now living in other, supposedly more salubrious, countries and cultures. Although it has some similarities to these earlier critiques, 30 Days in Sydney differs in that, like James Joyce, Peter Carey has spent his days abroad identifying with and writing obsessively about his native land, seeking to contribute positively to a nascent Australian mythopoesis, and – perhaps because of that engagement – he has not attracted the hostility other expatriates have provoked. When he is critical of Australia, it is, unlike Greer and Humphries, more in sorrow than in anger, and he still finds much to celebrate when he juxtaposes Australian culture to English and American cultures.

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20 As Andreas Gaile has noted in his review of 30 Days, “it is at the intersections between fact and fiction that the quality of this ‘wildly distorted’ account resides – as with so many of the full-scale Carey fictions”; Gaile, “The Inescapable Presence of the Past,” Antipodes 16.1 (2002): 83.


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An author’s creative power does not always obey his will: the work proceeds as it can, and often presents itself to the author as something independent or even alien.¹

MY LIFE AS A FAKE (2003), Peter Carey’s eighth novel, presents itself as a fictionalized postscript to the so-called Ern Malley affair, a hoax which was perpetrated in Melbourne in 1943, and which is as canonical to Australian literary culture as the Ossian poems or Thomas Chatterton’s Rowley forgeries are to British. The Ern Malley hoaxers were Harold Stewart and James McAuley, two young Australian poets with neoclassical tastes, who had become infuriated by what they saw as the “gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship” in Australian verse.² Their aim was to set Australian literary modernism upon a pyre of its own making, and their chosen target was Angry Penguins, an esteemed little magazine edited by Max Harris, then the wunderkind of the Australian literary scene. In the course of one Saturday afternoon, Stewart and McAuley sat down with pens and paper and created a fictitious poet, whose similarly fictitious poems they


intended to submit to *Angry Penguins*. His name, they decided, was Ern Malley, and he had worked first as a mechanic and then as an insurance salesman, before dying tragically young of – and here Harris should have smelled a rat – “Grave’s disease” (61). After devising Malley’s curriculum vitae, Stewart and McAuley mocked up a small body of work: a dozen or so poems written in the modernist style, and put together, as McAuley later described it, by “opening books at random, choosing a word or phrase haphazardly. We made lists of these and wove them into nonsensical sentences” (138). They then distressed sheets of paper with tea and sun, typed up the poems, and despatched them to Harris with a cover letter from Ern’s equally make-believe sister, Ethel, which asked Harris to consider them for publication (55, 100).

The malign beauty of a successful hoax is that, like a successful judo throw, it uses the weight of belief to throw its victim further than would otherwise have been possible. It is an act of bad faith which relies on the energy of good faith for its success. Max Harris supplied the good faith that McAuley and Stewart needed. He printed all of Malley’s poems in the Autumn 1944 edition of *Angry Penguins*, to which he prefaced an ecstatic foreword. When the hoax was revealed, Harris’s reputation as an editor was devastated. He was also brought up before an Adelaide court on charges of having distributed “indecent publications” – the poems were construed as unacceptably homo-erotic – a twist which yet further complicated the questions of originality, authenticity and responsibility that the hoax had raised (181).

*My Life as a Fake* partly disguises, and partly plays upon, its relationship with the Ern Malley affair. The novel purports to be the memoir of Sarah Wode–Douglass, a moneyed Englishwoman who has spent most of her life as the editor of *The Modern Review*, a poetry magazine with a prestigiously small circulation. In Malaysia in 1972, Sarah by chance meets an Englishman named Christopher Chubb. Chubb is seedy, sunken and malarial; an expatriate roué living with a Chinese woman and running a bicycle repair-shop in a Kuala Lumpur back-street. Quite the sort of person, in other words, that an upper-class Englishwoman would wish to avoid. When Sarah first sees Chubb, however, he is reading a volume of Rilke, and this detail, in its incongruous setting, sparks her interest. Sarah’s companion in Malaysia is John Slater, a solipsistic English poet and novelist (“The Amersham Satyricon had been a huge bestseller”3), who tells her that Chubb was the man behind a hoax which had rocked Australia in the late 1940s. Chubb, Slater reveals, invented a working-class poet called Bob McCorkle, and submitted McCorkle’s make-believe oeuvre to a well-regarded poetry journal named – and here Carey’s

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readers should nod knowingly – *Personae*. The results of Chubb’s hoax were, Slater tells Elizabeth, disastrous: *Personae*’s editor, a glamorous young Jewish littérateur named David Weiss, eventually hanged himself out of shame and despair.

Despite Slater’s warnings, Sarah meets with Chubb again and, in the book’s most significant scene, he shows her a fragment of poetry allegedly by Bob McCorkle. Reading it, Sarah feels “that excitement in my blood which is the only thing an editor should ever trust” (27). She is convinced that she has found the real thing, and becomes desperate to procure and publish more of McCorkle’s poetry in *The Modern Review*. Chubb, however, will not let her see the fragment again until she has listened to his story, and the greater part of the novel is taken up by Sarah’s transcription of Chubb’s meandering and intermittently implausible account of his post-hoax life. Chubb’s most extraordinary claim is that Bob McCorkle, the poet he had “invented,” took human flesh and pursued him round the world for several years, eventually stealing Chubb’s daughter and claiming her as his own. “I had brought him forth,” Chubb proclaims to Sarah. “I imagined someone and he came into being” (97–98). His account of his pursuit by the vengeful McCorkle veers between the comedic – at one point the monster appears and calls him an “unmitigated cunt” (150), an insult palmed straight from Bruce Robinson’s *Withnail and I*) and the sub-gothically chilling. It is never made clear, either to Sarah or to the reader, whether Chubb is telling the ‘truth’ about McCorkle’s incarnation, whether he is deluded from too much tropical sun, or whether he is further indulging his fondness for hoaxing. This epistemological blurriness, of course, is part of Carey’s point. *My Life as a Fake* ends in an ambiguous and bloody scene which deliberately unsettles even further the ideas of fakery, authenticity and creativity that the novel triangulates.

In several ways, *My Life as a Fake* represents another new departure for this compulsively self-reinventing novelist. Most importantly, it is Carey’s shortest novel to date (excluding his novel for children, *The Big Bazooohley*), and remarkable for the degree to which he has tamped down the narrative excesses of works such as *Illywhacker* (1985), *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). These novels all featured either an historical period (the Victorian nineteenth century), a country (Australia), or character-types (salesmen, itinerants, con-artists, criminals, vicars) who specialized in abundant storytelling. *Illywhacker* and *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* partly paid for their anecdotal exuberance in the coin of readability; their ebullient stars, Herbert Badgery and Tristan Smith, often seemed less like people than ticker-tape machines, spooling information and anecdotes out so fast that they forgot how to be human. It was in *Oscar and Lucinda* that Carey managed most successfully to reconcile engaging characters
with narrative profusion, and in that book his critical intelligence acted as a powerful magnet held invisibly beneath the page, pulling the myriad stories into meaningful patterns. In My Life as a Fake, by contrast, Carey is unusually parsimonious with ‘story’. Although Chubb, who holds the floor for much of the narrative, shows a fondness for digression, he is for the most part kept on track by his amanuensis, Elizabeth, and the resulting novel is, narratologically speaking, Carey’s least diffuse work to date.

As well as this major discrepancy, there are many affinities between My Life as a Fake and Carey’s previous works. Carey has long been interested in the issues of ventriloquism, style and originality – what it might mean to write or speak with an original voice, and, indeed, whether this would be desirable for a novelist – and these are the issues that preoccupy him again in My Life as a Fake. An earlier cause or consequence of this interest can be seen in Carey’s persistent preference for writing alongside, rather than from beneath, the styles of canonical authors. That is to say, while Carey has experimented throughout his career with the creative potential of intertextuality, he has never lapsed into pastiche as a mode of conducting this enquiry, preferring instead to forge and work with an alloy of modern and period language. Jack Maggs (1998), for instance, offered a strabismic squint back at the style and interests of Dickens’s Great Expectations, but was careful never simply to mimic that novel’s distinctive idiom. Similarly, although True History of the Kelly Gang (2000) took its initial stylistic cue from Kelly’s famous “Jerilderie Letter,” the long last testament left by Kelly, Carey’s novel is, as Peter Porter noted in the Times Literary Supplement, much more “than a product of a clever modern intelligence inhabiting a quirky and half-educated personality who lived a hundred years ago. […] it is invention rather than ventriloquism, an act of creation which gathers about itself a veritable ectoplasm of nineteenth-century colonial life.” Likewise, My Life as a Fake is also, as we will see, in close dialogue with a single text – Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein; but again, stylistically, Carey refuses the easy embrace of pastiche, and creates instead a complementary myth to Shelley’s own.

My Life as a Fake also shares, with almost all of Carey’s novels, a profoundly deceitful narrator. Christopher Chubb, with his penchant for anecdote and his alluring untrustworthiness, is a charismatically Careyan protagonist. Carey adores liars, for liars, in their conversational lawlessness, their rhetoric and their endless generation of story, perfectly suit his plasmically free-form imagination. This, as Helen Daniel has noted, is an adoration which he shares with other significant Australian writers of his generation, including Murray

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Bail and David Ireland. Several of Carey’s novels begin with a version of the Cretan Liar Paradox (“this history […] will contain no single lie,” declares his Ned Kelly, while the 139-year-old Herbert Badgery tells us straight off, if not straight up, that he is “a terrible liar and […] always [has] been a liar”), and Chubb follows in this tradition of not merely unreliable, but delightedly mendacious, narrators. “I loathe dishonesty,” he declares equivocally to Sarah at the start of one of his first monologues (29). In fact, My Life as a Fake represents the climax of a conceit with which Carey has long been fascinated: that lies, hoaxes, and fakes are, at their most successful, deeply creative forms of expression. For, at least according to his own testimony, Christopher Chubb’s lies – his hoaxed poems – are so thorough-going, so creative, that they not only dupe David Weiss into believing in their organicism, but they also assume bodily form and pursue Chubb around the world, thereby fulfilling or at least dramatizing Freud’s contention that a writer’s work “proceeds as it can, and often presents itself to the author as something independent or even alien.” Carey is also concerned here, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, with the more sinister question of how, given the proper context and told well enough or often enough, the soft and vulnerable rubber of lies can be vulcanized into the durable road-worthiness of fact. Making mendacity the subject of his books has in the past provided Carey with a relevant way to sidle up to what Daniel calls “the historical lies,” the “lies of settlement and Aborigines, the lies of English colonization, the lies of whole eras.” In Oscar and Lucinda and Illywhacker in particular, his novels function at one level as kangaroo courtrooms in which competing versions of Australian history are arraigned by sundry swagmen, gamblers and Christians. This obsession with the textuality – and therefore the manipulability – of history brings us to a final constant of Carey’s novels – including My Life as a Fake – which is that they are almost all wired to self-deconstruct. Save perhaps for the underrated The Tax Inspector (1991), Carey’s novels all reflect on the textuality of knowledge, and furthermore go to great lengths to flag up their own consequent contingency. “Am I a prisoner in the midst of a sign or am I a spider at its centre?” asks Badgery with provocative innocence in Illywhacker (545) – and sticks of metafictional gelignite like this are strapped carefully into place in each novel, rigged to bring the whole book tumbling down. It is for this reason (their impecable anti-foundationalist credentials), and thanks to his status as a so-

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7 See above, note 1.
8 Daniel, Liars, 175.
called postcolonial author, that Carey’s novels have proved so very attractive to academic exegetes.

All of these persistent interests of Carey’s – pastiche, mendacity, a profusion of story – might be bracketed as an interest in ‘unoriginality’. Postmodernism, as Terry Eagleton has remarked, “awards high marks to unoriginality,” and Carey has always taken care to signal the multiple sources of his novels, and also to make troublesome any easy equivalences between his own creative voice and those of his characters. Unoriginality both as a theme and as a textual determinant is pushed centre-stage in My Life as a Fake, in the course of which Carey scrutinizes the ideas of fakery and unoriginality within a specifically Australian context. One way to read this novel is as an inquest into, and a condemnation of, Australia’s particular susceptibility to hoaxing and fakery. It is a susceptibility, Carey contentiously implies, which stems from Australian culture’s desperation to be recognized as a producer of authentic literature and not just as its consumer. Certainly, Australia has an unusually rich and messy history of literary fakery, as Howard Jacobson details in his essay “Black Swan of Trespass.” Jacobson discusses the Wanda Coolmatrie scandal, the Paul Radley fraud and the Demidenko Affair, before speculating on why hoaxes seem to aggregate in Australia:

Long before universities picked up on the concept of the vanishing author, Australia was enjoying story-tellers whose stories you couldn’t trust, bearers of tall tales from a vast unexplored interior, tricksters and mountebanks who loved to astound the stay-at-home sophisticates clinging to the fringe. […] As sophisticates go, those hugging the south-eastern seaboard of the country for dear life were not strictly speaking the real thing. The real thing, as the English never tired of throwing in Australian faces (having nowhere else to throw it), was only ever where they were. It couldn’t have been much fun being an Australian intellectual – estranged from the centres of European civilization you revered and resented, estranged from the vitality of Australian culture itself, by virtue of its vulgarity and indifference; marooned, in the painter Albert Tucker’s words, in a ‘terminal unreality.’ Set an avant-garde situated in the wrong place and a native genius for parody and untruth at one another’s throats, and you have all the materials for over-refinement on the one side and derisive imposture on the other. As witness the several parties to Ern Malley, the greatest Australian poet never to have existed.

The contributions that Carey makes to this question of Australian hoaxery in My Life as a Fake are largely in keeping with Jacobson’s analysis, and take

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their cue from Michael Heyward’s observation that “the idea that Australians lived in a fake culture, the ‘hollowest of shams’, defenders of the butt-end of Europe in a land they did not understand, was pervasive in the thirties and forties.”¹¹ Thus, for instance, Carey has John Slater muse on the stability of “English culture,” and its consequent imperviousness to hoaxes, “whereas if you take a country like Australia, you see the whole thing is much more fragile” (19). Chubb tells Sarah that he committed his hoax “for the sake […] of art itself, and for a country where we seldom understand that we must be prepared to fight for issues bigger than an umpire’s decision at the Melbourne Cricket Ground” (77–78), and suggests that Australia’s sense of itself as a second-rate culture is what made it vulnerable to his hoax.

Slater also reminds Elizabeth early in the book that Australia “is the country of the duck-billed platypus. When you are cut off from the rest of the world, things are bound to develop in interesting ways” (19). This mention of the platypus is the first allusion to what becomes the novel’s organizing metaphor – that of monstrosity. For what is famously curious about the platypus is that it seems to be made up from the body-parts of other creatures. It has, specifically, an avian bill and a mammalian body. As Chris Baldick remarks in his study of the origins and versions of the Frankenstein myth, it is “an almost obligatory feature of the monsters in classical mythology that they should be composed of ill-assorted parts, sometimes combined from different creatures.”¹² The platypus is therefore on the same anatomically monstrous continuum as the hippocriff, the centaur, the Sphinx or, indeed, Frankenstein’s creature itself, another legendary being botched together out of sundry different parts.

My Life as a Fake signals its interest in, and analogies with, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein from its opening page – the epigraph is taken from Shelley’s work – and, throughout the novel, Carey nudges his readers, sometimes too forcefully, towards the perception of affinities between Chubb’s Mc Corkle and Frankenstein’s monster (when Chubb first describes McCorkle, it is as his “creature”; a composite being “over six feet tall,” with a “fantastic head, huge powerful nose and cheekbones, great forehead like the bust of Shakespeare,” 51). One effect of these continuous manipulations of the parallels with Frankenstein is to provide the theme (or, rather, the mood) of Australian gothic, an effect which has darkened several of Carey’s earlier books, most notably The Tax Inspector, a novel in which we are exposed to the macabrely romantic yearnings and sorrows of various misbegotten or hope-

¹¹ Heyward, The Ern Malley Affair, 15–16.
lessly thwarted characters. In *My Life as a Fake*, however, the counterpoint of the *Frankenstein* myth achieves more than just the intertextual equivalent of mood lighting, for it is designed to repeat, inflect and enhance Carey’s analysis of literary originality and integrity.

Early in his study, Baldick shows how Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was in dialogue with a central question of late-Romantic aesthetics: that of the relationship of the whole to the parts in art. It is precisely this aspect of the monstrous – its composite nature yet unified consciousness – that has been investigated by Carey in previous novels, though within a context of postmodern enquiry into ideas of originality and of integrity: the integrity of the text, the integrity of the work of art, and the integrity or originality of the human self. There is, for instance, Tristan Smith, the “mythic beast,” who collects and donates aspects of his personality with such prolific generosity that he throws into doubt any notion of simple, singular selfhood. In *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the ‘monstrous’ is made to overlap with that of the textual: Carey encourages us to identify the portmanteau carapace of armour which Kelly (who is repeatedly described as a “creature,” eg, 3, 343) dons at the end of the novel with the segmented structure of the novel itself, made up as it is of thirteen “parcels” of manuscript. On this theme of the textually composite and the monstrous, we might also recall Henry James’s description of the big nineteenth-century novels of Tolstoy, Trollope and Dumas – with their narrative excesses, their paper-clip chains of stories, and their casts of thousands – as “large loose baggy monster[s].” Carey’s own novels, which are openly indebted to these nineteenth-century ancestors, rejoice in precisely the exuberance and surfeit of which James disapproved.

*My Life as a Fake* is, in some respects, a psychic drama about a writer haunted by his own creativity, and by the power of words to galvanize themselves into uncannily autonomous life. More obviously, however, it is an investigation of the literary-critical ideas of fakery and originality, and it is chiefly to this end that Carey presses the *Frankenstein* myth into allegorical service. One reason why Shelley’s *Frankenstein* provides a peculiarly relevant counterpoint to Carey’s is that her novel was itself patched together from numerous textual sources, including Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and Erasmus Darwin’s field notes. Shel-

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13 Baldick, *Frankenstein’s Shadow*, 34.
15 Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. 7 (New York: Scribner’s & London: Macmillan, 1908): x. James’s famous phrase referred specifically to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, though the works of Dumas and Trollope were also implicitly being criticized.
ley was aware of the many texts which contribute to her own, and her ‘creature’ has often been critically interpreted as the embodiment of the anxiety of influence. There is, as Baldick puts it – and as several other commentators including Shelley herself, in the 1831 preface to her novel, have noted – “a peculiarly concentrated series of identifications between Frankenstein’s creation of the monster, and Mary Shelley’s creation of the novel.”16 In its afterlife as myth, Shelley’s Frankenstein has also, as Baldick shows, been disassembled, and bits of it have been re-used in dozens of books and films, of which Carey’s refashioning is only the most recent. Frankenstein therefore attains a double form of self-referentiality: “both its composition and its subsequent cultural status mim[e] the central moments of its own story.”17 Carey is fully aware of the “concentrated” reflexivities which attend Shelley’s novel, and is aware, too, that his novel increases this concentration by a further mole. He wishes us to notice that a novel (My Life as a Fake), about a textual monster made flesh (McCorkle), explicitly draws upon, among other sources, a novel (Frankenstein) which, like the monster it so famously describes, was itself sutured together from many different sources. “Invention,” wrote Mary Shelley in her preface, “does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself,” and this idea – that we do not create ex nihilo, but instead permute and recombine pre-existing elements – is more or less the intellectual conclusion to Carey’s novel.18 Like Frankenstein, My Life as a Fake also dramatizes and psychologizes the competing claims to and anxieties of ownership about a textual creation – Chubb’s (the claim of the author), Elizabeth’s (the claim of the reader), and McCorkle’s own (the claim of the text).

Carey’s novel thus in part demands to be read on the level of allegory – as a parable for some of the position-takings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary theory concerning originality and authorship. One of the potential difficulties with allegory is, as James Wood has noted, that it is always drawing attention to itself as allegory, “like someone who undresses in front of his window so that he can be seen by his neighbours.”19 Certainly, My Life as a Fake at times runs the risk of paralysing its own literary intelligence through excessive consciousness of itself as a textual entity. It also, in places, seems to fall foul of the tendency to simplification that has affected many of the (many)

16 Baldick, Frankenstein’s Shadow, 33.
17 Frankenstein’s Shadow, 30.
recent novels which have taken the subject of originality as their theme. The jacket-blurb to the British edition of *My Life as a Fake* describes it as an “ode to fakery at its most truthful and truth at its most fake, a novel that penetrates to the heart of the alchemy of literature itself.” These easy reversals, so beloved of writers on authenticity, read like false insights, which seem, with a wave of the grammatical wand, to solve the knotty problem of literary authenticity, without ever actually coming close to doing so. Similarly ersatz aperçus are dispersed through the main body of Carey’s novel. “Fake is fake no matter where you find it” (31), observes Chubb. Elizabeth realizes, as she lies to Chubb, that she has become “a fake [her]self” (83). It is hard not to feel that these tidy formules, placed like so many white stones in a fairy-tale, are there to help Carey’s readers find their way to a set of relatively facile conclusions: that authenticity is a phenomenon not of authorial intention but of readerly belief, and that all good literature involves fakery of some sort.

With its foregrounded interest in originality, and its use of intertextuality as a tool of self-anatomization, Carey’s novel can usefully be located within the mini-tradition of recent anglophone fiction which has taken authenticity as its subject. Writing in 1989, Fredric Jameson drew attention to the burgeoning of what he calls a “nostalgia for the present.” For Jameson, the multiple alienations wrought upon society by turbo-capitalism had finally resulted in the ultimate estrangement, that of alienation from the present instant. Jameson described a cultural industry in which the present could only be described by using languages of the past, and proposed that the relentless displacement of selfhood forwards and backwards in time had finally issued in nostalgia for a time when it was possible to experience without mediation. His own analysis was itself retroactive; by the time it emerged, British and American novelists had been working over precisely this theme for several years. Nostalgia for the present – for the authentic instant – persists as a theme in Anglo-American literature, especially its prose fiction. This thwarted yearning for the authentic – for what Don DeLillo would call “connection” – has haunted, with more or less presence, many recent novels, including, to take three well-known examples, William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and DeLillo’s own *Cosmopolis*. *Cosmopolis* describes the last twenty-four hours in the life of Eric Packer, the 28-year-old head of Packer Capital, a massive Manhattan investment company. He is a financial forecaster, whose predictive skills have made him a multi-billionaire. The data with which he works is dead within minutes of its production, and is in keeping with the culture that DeLillo depicts and seems to loathe, which is in continual acceler-

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tion, with words, objects and information becoming vestigial within minutes of their creation. As a man whose job it is to live in the future, Packer has no meaningful present-tense experience, and he spends the duration of *Cosmopolis* in his limousine, being driven through New York, and taking increasingly dramatic steps to reclaim a sense of the real for himself. He orders his proctologist to verify the symmetry of his prostate gland while he is talking to a female colleague. He has his bodyguard zap him erotically with her stun-gun. He shoots dead his head of security, Torval, to see what it feels like. Eventually and predictably – a word one uses with care in a novel about prediction – Packer engineers his own murder, as the terminus and consummation of his desire to reclaim the present.

Within this aesthetic of grief for the authentic, exemplified by *Cosmopolis*, an important sub-set has developed: those novels that scrutinize the question of what authenticity might mean in specifically literary terms. This question has been squared up to by writers including Peter Ackroyd (*The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde; Chatterton*), A.S. Byatt (*The Biographer’s Tale; Histories and Stories*), John Banville (*Athena; Ghosts*), William Boyd (*Nat Tate*), Julian Barnes (*Flaubert’s Parrot; A History of the World in 10½ Chapters; England, England; Letters from London*) and, persistently, Peter Carey. Boyd fabricated an apparently authentic ‘biography’ of Nat Tate (an artist who in fact never existed) and briefly tricked art historians on both sides of the Atlantic into believing in Tate’s existence (Boyd enlisted the connivance of Gore Vidal, Picasso’s biographer John Richardson and David Bowie to provide a nest of false fact within which the false Nat Tate could hatch). One of the essays in Julian Barnes’s collection *Letters from London* (1995) is titled simply “Fake!” and is a homage not least to Barnes himself, one of contemporary fiction’s most accomplished compactors and confabulators. *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) takes authenticity as its central subject (by posing the question of how we can know anything ‘true’ about Flaubert’s life). The central image of the parrot becomes a knowingly parodic – or parrotic; the homophony is played upon by Barnes – metaphor for the impossibility of knowing anything reliable about another human being, or text, or even oneself.

The conclusion reached by all of these writers on originality is the same as that reached by Carey in *My Life as a Fake*: that under careful scrutiny the apparent opposition between ‘making’ and ‘faking’ collapses into near-identity; that fakery of some sort is a normative and necessary condition of literary creation; and that repetition is the first making and plagiarism the unoriginal sin. The difficulty which all of these writers face, and which none, save perhaps John Banville in *Athena*, solves, is how to take on these literary-theoretical questions of authenticity and re-cast them valuably in a fictional form without squeezing the human air out of a novel. *My Life as a Fake* is a
regionally inflected addition to this recent sub-genre, in that it provides a finely differentiated analysis of the tolerance or appetite of certain cultures – British, Australian, American – for hoaxes and fakes. However, Carey – like Barnes in *England, England*, or Byatt in *The Biographer’s Tale* – spends too much time creating an intellectual structure within which his analysis of fakery can legitimately take place. The result is a novel that suffers from being in continual and uneasy migration between the domains of the real (Sarah and Chubb in Malaysia), the magically real (McCorkle’s maddened return), and the literary-theoretical (the debate centered on the authenticity of Chubb’s narrative).

This motif of the multiply-authored, or at least multiply-sourced, creation crops up throughout *My Life as a Fake* in different guises. The final occurrence comes close to the end of the novel, when Sarah is shown a butchered body; on seeing the head, and realizing it is Chubb who has been murdered, she has an epiphany:

I knew at last what it must be. *Sparagmos*. This was the horror at the poem’s end. The man I had spent the afternoon with was now dismembered. (263).

There is oblique evidence in the novel that Sarah – whose own language is haunted both by the polished periods and upper-class, gold-plated idiom of Bloomsbury and by the imagistic flashes of the late modernists – is here bringing to mind something that she has gleaned from Ezra Pound’s series of essays “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.” The Osiris essays were published over the winter of 1910–11 in *The New Age*, a journal edited by A.C. Orage, and in them Pound laid out in a charismatically rambunctious fashion some of the elements of his new poetic of energy and resurrection. Pound had chosen the title of his series carefully. According to myth, Isis gathered the scattered limbs of her husband-brother, the god of fertility and the god of the dead. Pound’s poetry of the 1910s was to demonstrate a comparable dedication to assembling what he called the “corpus poetrarum” of various historical and literary figures into a fertile basis for new work. The essays provide a tacit manifesto for these poems, suggesting as they do that Pound envisaged his poetic experiments with the dramatic monologue as part of a process of revivification; of, as he suggested in a 1919 letter to Orage, bringing the dead...

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21 Thinking earlier on about the “many-limbed” personae peopling McCorkle’s poetry, Sarah reflects on Pound’s own “library of Babel” approach to poetic creation (235). There is even a hint of this principle of (dis)memberment and multiplicity in the “many Iliads” of the poem by Pound that the drunken Slater quotes to Sarah (110).
to life." The essays also, of course, provide a covert summary of McCorkle’s aesthetic and, more broadly, of Carey’s propositions in _My Life as a Fake_. By “the body of truth,” Elizabeth reflects at the close of the novel, “[Milton] meant, dismembered and scattered – in Greek, _sparagmos_” (265). It is this motif of disunity that, perversely, provides the unifying motif for Carey’s novel and also furnishes its conclusion. The conclusion which Carey reaches is nothing more thoroughgoing – but also nothing less trivial – than the insight that all literature is made from the bits and pieces of other literatures, and that linguistic creation, as George Steiner has written, is always “crafted or cobbled out of material […] itself prestressed and irreparably second-hand.”

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**NOTE:** A standardized ‘upper-case’ approach has been taken with regard to review titles, irrespective of the layout in the original.

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#### 4.6.1 Reviews


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4.10.1 Reviews


4.10.2 Article


4.11 Jack Maggs

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4.11.2 Articles and Essays


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